

ANN DENTON

KATIE MAY

DARKEST FLAMES  BOOK 1

DEMON KISSED

I fucked up.

Honestly, how was I supposed to know that a love spell was actually a summoning spell...and that it would actually work?

Now, I have five demons at my beck and call, their sole purpose to fulfill my heart's deepest desire - which is to make William Washington fall head-over-heels in love with me.

Their solution? Insert themselves in every aspect of my life in order to make William jealous. As my fake boyfriend? Check. As my sexy new teachers? Check. As the psychotic, sexy stalker who follows me around? Check.

Their goal is to make William fall in love with me.

And my goal is to not fall in love with them in the process.

This is a reverse harem paranormal romance containing psychotic, alpha males, student/teacher relationships, strong language, and sexual situations.

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EXPRESSO PUBLISHING

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1st Edition

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To the dark, fictional men who stole our souls.



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HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ABSOLUTELY, one hundred percent sure that *ultimate humiliation* was about to head your way? Like, have you ever had chest-clenching anxiety and just known that you were seconds from wanting to sink into the deepest, darkest hole you could find and live there *forever*, until your fingernails grew into claws and you forgot how to talk and could only growl like Swamp Thing?

That's how I feel right now as Stacy clutches my wrist and drags my unwilling heels toward William Washington. He's only six feet away across the grass, red Solo cup in hand, chuckling at someone's joke and brushing his epic bangs aside. His honey brown eyes crinkle at the edges as he laughs, and my heart gives a longing *thu-thud*. But my intuition just knows...talking to him will be an utter disaster.

Just like last time.

"No!" I whisper-scream, batting at her hand.

But she has those fake shellac nails that provide military-grade protection against my weak attacks as she pulls me through the moonlit cemetery that has become tonight's Lakewood Prep party spot.

"You're doing it. You're talking to him," she grits out as she readjusts her grip on my arm, which has suddenly become slick with nervous sweat. With her free hand, she bats her blonde bangs out of her blue eyes so she

can turn a laser glare on me. “You never come out, Kat. You’re talking to him.”

“I can’t,” I whimper. “Don’t you remember the tick disaster?” Last time I tried talking to William, a month ago, I got so nervous that I accidentally spouted off facts about the lifecycle of the tick. (Our dog got ticks. And Google is a black hole. Shut up. Stop laughing. I’m sure you’ve done it too.)

“You can,” Stacy croons, as if speaking softly will convince me. Newsflash, I’m half-deaf. Can’t hear at all in my right ear. Speaking softly is a sure way to get me to ignore you. Stacy knows this but continues anyway. “You’ve been crushing on him for years. And now you’re both here, and it’s night, there’s candlelight—”

“Because someone put fucking candles on the gravestones!” I hiss.

“Hey, no bashing the party decorations,” a guy on my left says. I turn and scrunch my nose at Stacy’s latest crush, David. He’s a new guy, transferred in a few days after school started, and Stacy has been stuck to his ass from day one. Just like a tick.

“Dave, a little help?” I plead with the football player.

“Nope. Better you than me,” he quips. He’s not wrong.

Stacy is bull-headed. Always has been. That’s why David’s easy-going nature is the perfect fit for her. Unfortunately, he’s not the perfect fit for me when I need a defender from her overzealous matchmaking.

Foul. Or penalty. Or whatever the football-y saying is—he’s totally in trouble.

Stacy finally succeeds in dragging my pouty ass over to the popular kids’ circle, which she’s tangentially part of based on her daddy’s bank account.

I immediately turn my frown upside down because I have no chill and zero ability to play it cool or fit in with these apathetic people who are bored by the sight of Maseratis—my dream car, by the way, and a cherry red Maserati Grand Turismo is totally not boring, at all. Instead, my smile

turns widely fake, and I toss my dark pink curls awkwardly over my shoulder as Stacy starts up small talk.

I do *not* look directly at William Washington. That would be stupid, like looking at the sun. He's totally like the sun, with blond hair that has this seventies vibe that I love, which contrasts completely with the preppy polos and khaki shorts he always wears. And boat shoes. He wears boat shoes to school. How cute is that? It totally says, *Yeah I'm rich, but these are also the closest thing to slippers that you can wear in public, and I'm wearing them. Whatchoo gonna do about it?*

I'll tell you what people do. Copy him.

Boat shoes have suddenly been the in thing at Lakeside Prep. I stare at William's boat shoes, admiring the loops in the laces.

Yup. I'm not awkward at all. Especially not when his best friend, Jason, calls my name and I'm forced to look up and my cheeks turn as pink as my hair, as blood flees my head and ensures I am absolutely incapable of thinking clearly enough to form an intelligent response to his question.

Jason—never Jace, he hates Jace—looks at me with a soft kind of pity in his brown eyes when he asks, “So, what did you do today, Katrina?”

I swallow and blink, hoping that my blue eyes look flirty or engaged or hell, just *not empty*, as I try to answer. I didn't do anything but watch Adam today, like every day, but I'm about to come up with a hilariously witty lie when...William Washington grabs my cup.

William Washington *grabs my cup*.

The heavens open, and light beams spill out and angels sing and—ohh shit, he's talking to me.

“Looks like you could use a refill. What's your poison?” he asks with a smile.

Gah. That smile. I mentally take a picture for my internal stalker shrine. It's where I keep little moments, like the time he opened the door for me when we walked into fifth period at the same time, and the time he laughed at my joke in English Lit.

I somehow get my vocal chords to stammer out, “Surprise me.” I try to give a sultry smile and maybe it works—I’m not sure—because William smiles back before clapping Jason on the shoulder and wandering off between the gravestones toward the kegs.

Jason takes a step closer to me. “So...you were gonna tell me about your day?”

I can’t keep the beaming smile off my face as I answer. “Yeah. It was great.”

“Great?” Jason grins. “Awesome.” He puts an elbow on the top of a gravestone and leans casually sideways. But his ankle gives out, and he ends up doing an awkward little shimmy for a second.

It’s kind of nice to see when the cool kids slip up, isn’t it? It makes me more comfortable around him, and he seems a little more human. “Yeah, I babysat my brother as usual, and we created a fort, then he declared himself a tank named Blood Eater, and he smashed that fort down before we stuck candles on blueberry muffins and sang ‘Happy Birthday’ to ourselves. All in all, a good day.” Damn. I’m blubbing on.

Stacy turns around and captures Jason’s attention, swooping in and saving me with some sports rivalry blah blah football game babble. *If* she’d have started a conversation about academic decathlon teams, *then* I could have talked smack, because The Milton School is going down like a hooker in a parking lot. But football isn’t my jam, in case that wasn’t clear.

Jason straightens up as he talks to Stacey, getting animated about stats and spreads. My eyes disengage from the pair and start roaming the gravestones, looking for William.

There is a stone cherub, a huge owl grave marker, and a carved stone bench currently holding a macking set of my classmates that blocks me from seeing my “double W” clearly. I only ever call him that in my head because it’s too pathetic a nickname to ever say out loud. I don’t even love it. I kind of hate the fact that I even came up with it, but my brain does whatever the hell it wants sometimes, and ‘double W’ is one of those things.

William refills my cup and then hands it to Sarah, another senior with legs for days and a Day-Glo purple skirt. What the fuck?!!

I take a step to the side, intending to get a better look, when I bump into Jason—when did he get that close?—and send him tumbling forward. His face nearly smashes into a headstone. Mine would have. But his football player reflexes pay off, and he ends up doing a half push-up off the thing instead, springing right back up like one of those inflated clown toys that rebound when you punch it.

“Whoops! Sorry. So sorry.” I reach out a hand to help, but then, thinking that might make things worse, retract my hand, and press my lips together, embarrassment flushing my cheeks as a couple of the popular girls look my way and sneer. Ugh.

“He’s fine. Boy toy’s not broken. Dick’s all yours later.” My snark pops out like a Jack-in-the-box, surprising me with a brand of rude I usually never whip out in public. Decathlon tournaments are not considered public since we only have like five attendees.

Janie St. James, resident queen bee, lets her painted red lips fall open in a dumb, shocked look, as if she wasn’t aware I could speak, much less insult her.

Stacy gives me a wide-eyed “shut the fuck up” glare. My best friend is telling me to abort mission.

It’s good advice.

I turn to Jason, intending to apologize and book it. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to almost kill you. Or insinuate your dick has their diseases all over it.” Oh my god. My mouth is a gun. And it’s shooting me in the face right now with unfiltered honesty.

Fuck me. Social suicide for one, coming right up!

I stomp off, hands buried in the pleats of my short black skirt, my face the color of Red Vine licorice. I don’t even wait for Stacy. She shouldn’t be seen with me ever again.

I don't know what came over me. I mean, I'm shocked over the William thing. But why the hell was I so rude? It was funny though, wasn't it? Jason smiled at me, at least.

And Mandy and Janie St. James can go suck a duck's dick. Janie can actually suck two and hopefully drown while she's doing it. She acts like she's hot stuff and her face wouldn't melt under a heat gun. Okay, fine. Anyone's face would melt under a heat gun. But hers is half plastic, which I know for a fact because her parents hadn't been happy with the results of her nose job and they'd hired my parents to sue the doctor.

I'm pissed that my mouth shot off, because now I don't get the memory of William handing me a drink to add to my pillow bank, which is like a spank bank, only you dreamily hold your pillow and stare off into space, fantasizing about leaping through meadows instead of shaking bed frames.

I weave around gravestones, determined to leave this party before my reputation dies a horrid Shakespearean death in front of my eyes. And when I see double W (still hate that name) talking to yet another girl, obviously having forgotten about me, I die a slow and painful death inside.

Back home to play games with Adam—

David's hand on my forearm stops me. "Hey, Katrina, wait."

I glance up at him, confused. David's a cool dude, but we only ever interact in passing. His tongue is usually too occupied with the socially-acceptable lickable parts of Stacy when I run into him.

Stacy catches up a second later. "What was *that*?"

I growl. Literally. "I don't frickin' know. But it's why I didn't want to go over there in the first place. Getting within five feet of William sets off my dumb."

She shakes her head and clucks her tongue.

David's eyes light up as he stares at me. "Wait. You like William?"

I give Stacy a look that says, *really*?

Maybe he's been hit in the head a few too many times if he's this slow on the uptake. "Only since freshman year." Three long years. About to turn into four because my stupid masochistic heart can't find someone else who measures up.

I mean, he is the student body president. And on the rowing team—a practical sport that gives him the upper body of a Greek god without the long-term brain injuries, aka a sport I can actually get into. And those eyes. Those dreamy eyes that look like a honey pot.

Dammit. I'm getting swoony in public. I smack the look off my face and turn to Stace. "I'm gonna head out."

"No, wait. I actually have the perfect solution!" David grabs both our hands and takes a step backward, tugging lightly. "A friend brought some awesome Halloween shit from Amazon. Ouija board. Spell kit. It's epic. Come play. I bet we've got a love potion in there."

Stacy giggles. "No way! Who wasted money on that?"

"Wasted? It's good, clean, demonic fun. *Wasted, pshh*," he scoffs, pulling us closer to the sweeping branches. He adopts a spooky voice. "Come on. Unless you're...scared." He tosses his head back and gives a damn good impression of Vincent Price, the dude who did the monster laugh on Michael Jackson's "Thriller." Yes, I know. You can thank decathlon trivia for that tidbit of knowledge.

Stacy giggles and turns to me, excitement lighting up her pretty face. "Come on. It'll be fun, Kat."

It's this or Candyland.

I sigh and agree to stay a few more minutes.

"Yes!" David drops our hands and pulls back the branches of the willow as if he's opening a curtain. "Welcome, ladies, to the pit of corruption."

We walk under the canopy and find a couple other students sitting near the tree with a Ouija board, eyes focused on the board as they giggle and spell out "S-E-X." I have no idea what their question was, but I'm pretty sure I can see the sophomore who's controlling the board and spelling out

answers. I predict the next spirit they contact will be spelling out “D-I-C-K.”

David sits down with an oomph next to a junior guy and then pulls Stacy onto his lap. “Alright, man, hook us up,” David tells the dude, who’s flipping through a book with a pentagram on the front.

“What do you want?” the guy asks, lowering the book so I can see his black tortoiseshell glasses and thin nose.

“We want a love spell!” Stacy claps her hands together rapidly, almost bouncing out of David’s lap.

“Really?” Tortoiseshell glasses raises a dark brow.

“It’s for me,” I say flatly, taking a seat directly in front of him. I don’t get why he cares, it’s not like this shit will work anyway. What does it matter if he pretends to cast it on Stacy and David?

Glasses guy looks me up and down in a judgey sort of way that I don’t appreciate. I start to get a bit self-conscious. I check my low-cut black tank but don’t see anything wrong. I try to subtly check my hair, but there’s no grass or anything in it.

“Are you gonna do the spell?” I ask before I get so paranoid, I have Stacy check my teeth for food.

“I need you to spit on the ground, right here,” he says, pointing at a patch of dirt.

Really? That’s so lame. We aren’t gonna hold hands and chant shit?

“Right here,” he repeats.

“Come on, Kat, it’ll be silly,” Stacy pleads.

I spit, only so her pig-headedness doesn’t kick in. Then I watch as the guy references the book for a moment before he uses his finger to draw a pentagram around my spit.

Original. Hope this book didn’t cost more than five bucks.

“Now a hair,” the faux-wizard commands.

“What? Really? Don’t these Amazon kits come with spell ingredients? You know, rose petals or something for love spells?”

“No.” The wizard adjusts his glasses, and I get a total Harry Potter vibe for a second. It’s quickly gone when he frowns at me—he’s got a very Slytherin-y frown—and says, “Are you gonna do this or not?”

I scrunch my nose. “That seems like a rip—”

Stacy leans forward and rips a couple strands of hair off my head, and I yelp, casting her a scathing glare.

Wizard guy gestures toward the pentagram, and she tosses my poor mutilated hair onto the little star. Then he haltingly reads some old English from the book, making me grind my teeth and just stop short of reaching out and reading the spell aloud myself.

“Ye olde forces of the dark

Arise from the depths and cast thou a spark

Bring with thee the flames of the heart

To pierce another and force a start.”

His magnificent reading is interrupted by his sneeze. He does not cover his mouth.

Droplets of spit from some guy I don’t know coat my arms.

Candyland sounds more fun at this point. Playing with a four-year-old might even be more hygienic.

“*And I’m out.*” I shove up to my feet, give Stace and David a wave, push out of the willow tree’s wall of branches, and stride off to my car quickly, avoiding eye contact with everyone and wiping the tops of my arms off on the back of my shirt.

This is a disappointing end to the evening. *Not quite as horrific as if I’d just left after the whole mouth-diarrhea debacle, but still bad*, I think as I slip into the driver’s seat. I close the door just in time, because the wind

picks up and starts to whip the trees in the graveyard. Storm clouds roll across the moon, making the night as black as my mood.

The idiots at the party just cheer and raise their cups. “Halloween, baby!” one idiot crows.

I grumble as I start the engine. “Fuck Halloween. And this stupid party. And Janie St. James. And stupid allergy guy. And Will—” But I can’t say it. I can’t curse my crush.

I’m just gonna be doomed to love him from afar *forever* like some creep, because real girls don’t get dream guys—that bullshit’s for fairy tales—and love spells and magic don’t exist.



I GET HOME AFTER MIDNIGHT, and the storm is raging full blast. I have to park in the driveway instead of the garage because both my parents are actually home for once, so I have the pleasure of running from my car to the door. Yippee.

It's less than ten feet, but I'm drenched and shivering when I slam down the button to close the garage and slip off my socks and shoes on the lame premise of trying to track less water into the house.

When I slip inside, I'm immediately attacked.

"Katty!" Adam barrels into me full force, and though he's only four, the kid's a brick. He's not chubby, he's just literally built like a wall, thick and sturdy. And he's the perfect height to screw with my center of gravity and send me tumbling backwards onto the kitchen floor.

I barely keep my head from smacking the tile, and I'm calling that a win after tonight's craptacular turnout.

"Buddy, what are you doing up?" I ask, giving him a hug because he's soaked anyway now.

He burrows his head painfully near my ribs, giving me one of his so-called "super cuddles." Then he leans up and looks at me. His blue eyes are so much like mine it's scary. But whereas I've dyed my dark brown hair, his is still an unruly mop on his head. Combined with pale skin and cheeks

that still have a hint of that baby chub, he's the most damn adorable kiddo in the world. "I was waiting for you so we can do bedtime," he states.

Ire flares in me. They're *home*. My parents are fucking home, but they didn't even put him to bed? I swear, they're gone so much, I think sometimes they forget they even have kids, or what the hell to do with us. We're just another utility bill. Lights paid? Check. Gas paid? Check. Kids' tuition? Check.

I wrap an arm around Adam and sit up, then we huddle together as we scurry through the kitchen toward the downstairs bathroom. While I towel us both off, he tells me all about the new YouTube videos he watched while I was gone.

"Then he set up this diesel train on the mountain. And it was diesel-electric."

"Diesel-electric," I correct his pronunciation.

"Yeah that," he continues, "and they broke a record and were fast as a tornado!" He jumps in his excitement and spins like a tornado.

I grin as I lead him up the stairs toward our bedrooms. The kid knows everything there is to know about model trains. Sometimes I worry about his future, that he'll be one of those guys with an entire basement set up full of model trains and tiny tin towns and the only woman he'll ever touch is a tin figurine. But then I remember how obsessed I was with Furby as a kid.

He'll be fine.

We pass my parents' door, which is shut, but I can hear my dad's obnoxious snore.

I blow out a breath and tell myself not to let my annoyance take over. When I do, it really seems to affect Adam. So, I smile and ruffle his hair as I turn on his bedroom light (because the dark is a big no-go). "Alright, buster, you change. I'm gonna go toss on my pj's."

He scrambles over to his dresser and starts pulling out shirt after shirt.

I shake my head. That's gonna be a disaster. But it'll wait for morning because I'm soaked and tired and definitely not ready to deal with it right now.

Once our teeth are brushed and nighttime routines are done and we're snuggled up in Adam's bed, ready for the eightieth reading of *Locomotive* by Brian Floca, I've nearly forgotten everything that transpired at the party. Total humiliation can't compare to Adam's adorable smile as he interlocks our fingers and listens. He dozes off around the fifth page, which is twice as quick as usual, but it *is* really late.

Once I can extract my fingers from his, I slide out of bed, put the book on his nightstand so it's ready for tomorrow, and go to bed myself in the room across the hall. As I close my eyes, I hope I'll have good dreams. I think I deserve them after the day I've had.

There's this one recurring dream in particular that I really hope hits me.

It involves a guy. Like all the best dreams do.

And he and I stretch out on the ground in the middle of this meadow, but it's not a meadow of flowers—it's a meadow made of clouds. It's crazy, I know, but when I dream about the cloud meadow, I feel like I've fallen into the spot where God, or whoever, grows the clouds for Earth.

It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen.

The base is this big fluffy cumulonimbus cloud that's even softer and better than memory foam when you walk on it. All around, tiny clouds spring up and sway in the wind as if they are tiny plants, or balloons on strings tethered to this one huge cloud while they grow.

There are wispy pink baby clouds that look like they belong at dawn on a spring morning. Small but robust blue-grey thunderheads, that reach no higher than mid-calf, sparkle with itty bitty lightning bolts. Yellow clouds grow in tufts and look as poisonous and gloomy in miniature form as they do right before a tornado. My favorites are the soft white clouds that grow in bunches, because my dream self can touch them and reshape them with a thought. I've probably made a million cloud roses in my sleep.

But even better than all of that, is *him*.

Sometimes, when I walk through the cloud meadow, I find Ziel. He's this shadowy figment of my imagination, my brain's conception of the perfect guy, I think. He's so indescribably handsome...and I mean *indescribably*. When I dream about him, as soon as I see him, my stomach flutters and the tips of my fingers tingle. His presence and even the very idea of him makes my nervous, nerdy self so giddy that when I get up after dreaming about him, my cheeks are flushed and I can't stop smiling.

Thank God he's not real. Otherwise, I would have completely humiliated myself in front of him. Just like with William.

But oh, the power and pleasure of dreams is that I can do whatever I want. *Be* whoever I want.

Just like he can. In my dreams, Ziel changes his appearance all the time. He'll have blue eyes for five minutes, and then they'll shift to green. Some nights, his hair will be long and raven-black, and other nights, it will be short and blond. I can always tell it's him because of the gladiator-style armor he wears, complete with a red cape like my own personal Thor or Superman.

Apparently, my dream self has a thing for superheroes. But why not? Why shouldn't I? Dreams give us the freedom we don't have in life. To be brave and better and just *more* than we actually are. So...superhero hot guy it is. And brave Kat too.

It took me forever to realize that I could be different—it only happened like six months ago—but once I did, instead of just watching him from afar, I marched right over like the cool, sophisticated girl I am not and said hi. I even pulled off a perfect hair flip to go with it.

"I'm Katrina." I'd smiled up at him.

"Ziel." His voice had been this perfect gruff scratch that made me want to rub my thighs together. *That* part I can remember. I'm pretty sure my brain modeled him after Henry Cavill's voice, but now that I've spoken with him in my head so many times, even a hot celebrity doesn't compare. Dream guys do it better.

Of course, since Ziel is a figment of my imagination, he'd had the perfect reaction during our first meeting.

He'd given me a smile that had set off a rocket ship inside my head—I'd been left with dazed smoke clouding my thoughts, awe, and utter fist-pumping, nerd-jumping joy.

And then, like a gentleman, Ziel had invited me to join his picnic. We'd sat down on the cloud—blankets are redundant in a cloud meadow—and shared a glass of wine and some grapes as we talked about life.

The first dream, I'd made everything about myself up. I'd told him my life as if I was stupid Janie St. James. But mid-story, he'd turned to me and growled, "I hate perfect."

I've only ever told him the truth since. Every truth. Every worry, every hurt—Ziel gets everything.

In return, he's told me stories that make me laugh and cry, stories so unbelievable and fantastic that I always promise myself I'll write them down when I wake up. But the details always slide through my fingers like sand. Which sucks. Try having your dream self be this amazing fantasy writer and then waking up normal.

Boo.

Tonight, Ziel is waiting for me in the cloud meadow, and I squeal with excitement as I run toward him. I wrap him up in a hug that's just as aggressive as the one Adam gave me earlier.

"Whoa, someone's happy! Good day?" he asks.

"The worst," I sigh, inhaling his scent, which is always just like a campfire. I pull back from our hug and smile up at his grin. "I'm just happy to see you. You haven't been here the last few nights." Because my stupid brain sometimes doesn't let me have what I want, even in dreams.

Ziel pulls back and gestures toward the clouds, where our usual chilled white wine and red grapes await.

I sit on the cloud, tucking the skirt of my flowy white dress around my legs. My dream self is always in the height of fashion. Or has learned that she damned well better be since I started having Ziel dreams.

Ziel sits down near me and plucks a grape out of the bowl. He feeds it to me, like he always does, his thick fingers pressing the fruit to my lips, then slowly dragging over my bottom lip after I've taken the grape.

It's the only intimate thing he ever does. I don't have any idea why my subconscious would give me such a hot guy, one who actually listens, and then turn me into a damn prude...but she does. My subconscious is quite possibly ruled by a demon.

All the same, I live for the burn in Ziel's gaze when he tells me, "Eat. Then tell me everything that went wrong."

He leans back and stretches out along the clouds, watching me as I eat a few grapes. Then I lay back at his side, and we stare up at the empty expanse of blue sky above us—there are never any clouds up there—while I tell him about the party.

He listens and grunts and growls and gets angry at all the right parts. His outrage on my behalf makes me feel better, and I push up on my side, propping my head up on my elbow. My pink curls tumble around my head as I stare at him. "Thank you."

"I didn't do anything." He smiles his rocket ship smile, and it's a moment before I can recover.

"You listen," I tell him. "It makes it feel like I'm important for once."

A sound pierces the dream, and I start to fade out of it, far sooner than I want to. But as I fade, I think I hear Ziel say, "You are important. You're everything." Just like a dream guy would.

Adam's tiny voice pierces my ears. "Katty, I had a bad dream. Can I sleep with you?"

I pull my little brother into bed and get him tucked in beside me before I attempt to get back to Ziel. But I don't make it back to the cloud meadow.

Instead, I dream about that stupid love spell and remember how Stacy yanked out my hair.

In the morning, when I wake up, my bed is empty—Adam's gone. And my parents have taped their requisite "Out for the Day" note to their door.

But when I go downstairs, I don't find my brother eating dry cereal and watching cartoons. I find him giggling and laughing. And sitting in the middle of five fucking strangers who've broken into our house.



FOR A MOMENT, I'm rooted to the spot in horror, unable to peel my eyes away from the sight before me. My gaze sweeps over the men present, who are still oblivious to my lingering self at the base of the stairs.

The most logical solution is that these men work for Dad. Maybe business associates?

Yeah, I don't believe that for one second.

Adam sits in the center of the leather couch, one of his favorite toy trains in his hands. He dubbed it the "Red Lizard," despite the fact it's blue and has no lizard whatsoever on it.

Two men sit on either side of him, listening attentively as he shows them his toy. The one on the right has reddish-brown, almost auburn hair with a slight curl. He's wearing a white wifebeater that showcases a left arm covered in intricate tattoos. This man could rival any supermodel on a magazine cover. I know it's weird to think about—for all I know, he could be planning my untimely murder—but *shit*, he's sexy. He practically oozes raw sex-appeal.

If he does murder me, he's definitely getting a TV show out of it. Housewives everywhere would pay to watch him confess.

The man on the other side of Adam is tall, with dark skin and even darker buzzed hair. He's bedecked in a form-fitting suit that accentuates the muscles on his tall frame. This guy...this guy could totally work for my

father. Maybe an accountant at his law firm? Yup. That makes complete, logical sense. Father must've asked a few of his most trusted associates to come over and...prosecute people. Yup. That's totally what's happening right now.

Because it's completely ridiculous to believe that five men are here to kill us, right?

Right?!?

That thought dissipates like the rest of my hopes and dreams when I see the third man hovering over one of our plastic plants. It's tiny, barely able to reach my chest, and has hundreds of green, fake leaves on a realistic-looking trunk. Mom is allergic to literally anything and everything that involves the outdoors. It's why she never comes camping with us on our yearly camping trips. Come to think of it, Dad doesn't usually go either. He always ends up canceling the night before with claims that he has an important client meeting.

And...

Why am I thinking about this?

Oh, God. I'm losing my mind.

This third male is thinner than the two on the couch, but unlike the other ones, he's shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of low-hanging jeans. His blond hair is shorn short on both sides, meeting in the middle in a spiky, bright pink mohawk.

He's also currently watering the plastic plant with a pot of coffee, a cheerful grin on his face as the brown liquid cascades over the edge of the pot.

Don't panic, Katrina. Don't. Fucking. Panic.

I'm panicking. I'm officially panicking. What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

My eyes flit from crazy guy to a fourth man sifting through the mail we usually place on a side table. He grabs an envelope at random, reads the

name with pursed lips, then tosses it to the side. This one appears older than the others by a few years, with light dirty blond hair and a neatly trimmed beard. The gray shirt he wears is low enough to see angel wings tattooed onto his chest.

Wasn't there a fifth man? Where's the fifth man?!?

But I can't focus on that...or anything else, for that matter. I need to get Adam away from them, and fast.

"Adam." I'm shaking like a leaf in the wind, my attention fixated on my younger brother. His head snaps up at the urgency in my voice, his lips curling downwards. "Adam, come here." The rest of the men stare at me with varying degrees of amusement and annoyance, but I pay them no mind. "Adam!"

"But, my friends..." My little brother trails off with a petulant frown.

"Adam, come here." I extend my hand and wait, terror coursing through me.

Please don't hurt him. Please don't hurt him. Please don't hurt him.

Those words repeat in my head like a song, a mantra, a prayer.

My breath whooshes out of me in relief when a rather reluctant Adam jumps from the couch and hurries towards me.

"I want to play with my friends," he exclaims indignantly, stomping his foot on the ground. I warily glance over his shoulder at the four guys still watching me intently. The pink-haired man grins slightly as he ventures a step closer, still holding the damn coffee pot like one would hold a knife.

"Adam, why don't you go see if Mrs. Johnson is home?" I suggest gently, speaking of our gray-haired, stern-faced neighbor. As expected, Adam makes a face.

"Ew. She's smelly."

I have a tenuous hold on my patience. All I know for certain is that I need to get Adam away from these men.

“Now!” I rarely, if ever, raise my voice with him, but I can’t muster the strength to be upset when tears well in his eyes. Without another word, he storms out of the house, hopefully to Mrs. Johnson’s.

Leaving me alone with the terrifying men.

I know I should leave. I know I should get the fuck out of here, but I can’t risk leading them back to Adam. I need them to focus on me, only me, until my little brother is safe. Hopefully, he’ll tell Mrs. Johnson about the strange men in our house...and hopefully, the crazy old bat won’t write it off as a “high school orgy,” as she eloquently puts it. Because, yes, she has used those words before.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” I whisper, backing up a step. We have one landline phone in the living room, a few steps behind me on a decorative table. If I can just get to it...

Abruptly, the pink-haired man is standing in front of me, leaning down, his nose centimeters from my neck. He inhales deeply, body rumbling with a contented growl.

“She smells divine,” he states nonchalantly as I stagger back a step, tripping over the pleated edge of our living room rug and landing on my ass. Fear continues to pulse through me, a palpable entity.

“Take whatever you want. Just don’t hurt me.”

“Like...like cherries,” the crazy man continues. His boyish smile makes him look innocent, but his chiseled jawline and the manic gleam in his eyes contradicts the first impression. Goosebumps skitter up and down my spine as I duck my head, avoiding eye contact.

“Please,” I whisper, not above begging to save myself. I need to stay alive for Adam; I’m the only one he has. The acid in my stomach sluices around when instead of stepping away, the strange man ventures even closer.

“Akor,” the angel-winged man snaps, stepping away from the discarded pile of letters. “Don’t tease the human.”

Human? The fuck?

“Just take whatever you want and get out,” I repeat. Is Adam okay? Did he make it to Mrs. Johnson’s house? Did he actually listen to me for once?

“Sweet, innocent, girl.” The man with the mohawk standing above me—Akor—clicks his tongue. “So sweet. So innocent.”

Terror like no other courses through my veins, and I scramble to my feet, racing towards the phone. I’m dimly aware of Akor (what kind of fucking name is that?) laughing raucously as another one of the men scoffs.

I just need to get to the phone and dial 911. I just need to talk to the police. My hand closes over the receiver—

Just as a new pair of large arms clasp around my waist, pulling me against a hard body.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that, little one,” Akor taunts from in front of me, tossing the empty coffee pot to his smartly dressed friend, who glares at it with disgust before daintily placing it on the table.

The fear I originally felt? That quickly transitions into icy anger, so potent I can practically taste it. With a fierce battle cry worthy of a fucking Oscar, I spin in the newcomer’s arms, pull back my leg, and kick the asshole as hard as I can in the nuts.

I full-on Simone Biles that shit—I swear my legs do the splits because he’s just that tall. Have you ever seen someone Dutch Dance before? That’s how high I kicked.

“Fuck you!” I scream as his eyes widen in panic, releasing me instantly. The fifth man—a fucking giant—falls to his knees and stares up at me through a fringe of thick, ebony lashes as his face creases with pain. Laughter erupts from the four men behind me, but I’m already running.

If I can make it to the front door...

If I can escape...

“I’m afraid we can’t let you leave, sweetheart.” The gorgeous man with auburn hair and the full sleeve of tattoos is suddenly behind me and hauls me backwards.

I scream, digging my heels into the ground in a desperate and futile attempt to escape him. But he's strong. So much stronger than me. And he smells really, really good, though I know I shouldn't be thinking about that when he's trying to *fucking murder me and eat my insides*.

Is this how I'm going to die? In my very home at the hands of these five men?

Oh, fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Enough! Van, release her!" the mail-thieving heathen snaps, and I begin to realize that he's the leader of this merry band of psychos.

The supermodel—Van, apparently—deposits me onto the armchair opposite the couch. Immediately, crazy Akor flops onto the floor in front of me, leaning his bare back against my legs.

"Nice and cozy," he purrs, tilting his head back to offer me a wink.

"What-what are you doing here?" I stutter out, trembling. "What do you want from me?"

"I believe the better question is what you want from us," Van snipes, eyeing me distastefully, as if *I'm* the one who broke into their house, terrorized them, and is now holding them hostage.

Ugh. Even with that asshole expression, he's still hot. Part of me hates him just for that...well, in addition to the whole "about to murder me" thing.

"You asked for us," the dark-skinned man in the suit replies with a soft smile. "And we came."

"I don't know you!" I protest immediately.

The fifth man takes a step closer, and I automatically tilt my head back to meet his piercing, glacial gaze. This guy...this guy is fucking massive. And I totally just kicked him in the balls. His dark hair is artfully tousled and frames a lightly tanned face. It appears as if even his muscles have muscles...and those muscles have even more muscles. He's probably the type that names them all. His right bicep? That's Betty. His left? Gertrude.

It's official. I've lost my mind.

He doesn't speak, continuing to watch me with unnerving intensity, his eyes as dark as his pitch-black soul.

He's going to kill me. He's totally going to kill me. I just kicked that giant in the nuts. Well, it was nice knowing you, world. Send me a postcard.

The sarcasm leaves when Adam's face flits through my mind again, and I'm suddenly sad. So sad—for him, not me. He deserves to be taken care of... But these men drag me out of my thoughts.

"You summoned us," the leader with the angel tattoo states in a tone that brooks no room for argument. "Last night. At your...Halloween party." He makes a slight face, as if it pains him to speak of something as trivial as a high school party.

"What?" I gasp out, heart beating in tandem to my racing thoughts. Nausea swirls in my stomach, threatening to expel the meager contents from the night before.

The leader—let's just call him Asshole for now—kneels down until he's at eye level with me. His eyes are a light shade of blue, almost gray, like that moment before the sun fully breaches the tree boughs in the morning. It's a surprisingly beautiful color for something so mundane. And then, the blue is swallowed by a red so bright and vibrant, it reminds me distinctly of staring into the twin abysses of Hell. I'm struck speechless, my mind whirling, as I stare into eyes that seem to embody evil. Pure, undiluted evil.

"What... How... Huh?" I manage to ask, rather articulately, if you ask me.

"We're demons, sweetheart," Van states indolently, crossing his tattooed arms over his chest where he now leans against the far wall. I have to crane my neck to the side to stare at the Vogue-worthy man, but when we make eye contact, he looks away immediately, lips compressed in a stubborn line. "And you summoned us."



HOLY MOTHER OF FUCK! Is it possible to have a heart attack at eighteen? Because I'm pretty sure that's what just happened.

"I'm stroking out. This is just a dream," I mutter, tossing a hand over my heart in a futile effort to get it to stop trying to escape my chest.

Akor reaches back from where he's perched at my feet and pinches my thigh, hard. I jump and squeal as he says, "No dream, Cherry."

The man in the suit on the couch sighs. "Akor, knock it off. You'll terrify her, and then we'll never get this mission completed." He stands, smoothing down his jacket and buttoning it before he strides over to me. He stands next to Asshole and extends a hand. "I'm Zolroth."

I glance from his hand to him several times. Is he serious? I look at Asshole, who tilts his head and presses his lips together.

"Told you we shouldn't have come here," Asshole growls, crossing his arms so that his pecs pop and those ironic angel wings lift a little. I glance furtively at his eyes, which remain red.

I didn't even see him slide in the colored contacts. Is he a magician? The Magical Murderers? Oh...all the television networks will fight to have their show.

"We're not murderers," Van calls out from his spot against the wall, where he perches with one leg up like he's on some magazine shoot. "At least,

not of humans. Though I do agree with you about the show. I'd watch the shit out of something like that."

Wait. Did I say that out loud? My panic must have damaged my filter, just like with William. Fuck me. No. Don't fuck me. No fucking. No fucking, and no murdering.

Van and Akor snicker, and I'm not sure if my random train of thought just now actually came out of my mouth. Possibly. Probably.

"Relax, we aren't going to hurt you," Zolroth speaks softly, as though I'm some cornered animal. Which I am.

Akor moves from near my feet and wanders into the kitchen. Without him right there, I feel a little more comfortable and confident. I consider taking Zolroth's hand and shaking it, because he's the only one offering me the tiniest sliver of hope that they are not about to cut me into a million pieces. But before I can, something comes flying right at my head.

"Think fast," Akor shouts from the kitchen.

Zolroth saves my life by pulling me against his chest. Damn, that suit hides Marine-worthy muscles.

"Akor!" Zolroth and Asshole both shout.

"Let's play the introduction game," Akor says, lobbing another item—which I can now identify as an orange—in my direction.

This time, Asshole plucks it from the air.

"Thanks for volunteering, Raz," Akor says with a grin, four more oranges held in his hands. "Now, peel that while you tell us all your darkest secrets."

"Nope," Raz replies, setting the orange down on the table.

Big mistake.

All four oranges smash into him at once. I don't even know how that's possible, but they do.

“Shit, Akor!” Van scolds, coming off the wall and sauntering forward.
“Calm down, man!”

My eyes travel back to Akor, who’s breathing heavily, nostrils flaring. “We need...to introduce ourselves. It’s *polite*.” He looks like a rabid animal, or a bull about to be released from its pen.

“She knows my name,” Van protests.

“USE THE FUCKING ORANGE!” Akor’s yell can probably be heard by the neighbors. Hopefully, Mrs. Johnson. And the police she should have called by now.

I take a step to the side, away from Zolroth. Maybe I can slink out while they fight amongst themselves.

But Zolroth stops me by gently grabbing onto my wrist and then interlacing our fingers. His chocolate lava cake, delicious eyes stare down at me as he says, “Sometimes, it’s best to indulge Akor. I’m Zolroth, I’m four-hundred eighty-seven, and I’m a materialism demon.”

“Darkest secret!” Akor growls.

Zolroth says without a hint of a grin, “I’ve already been through your panty drawer. And I have to say...you *need* my help.”

My face is a lobster. The screaming-in-the-pot, being boiled alive kind.

“Next!” Akor calls out, before I can even form words.

How do you curse out a psychopathic magician? One with demon delusions? Would he even care?

“Nope, don’t care,” Zolroth whispers in my ear, confirming that I’ve once again spoken my thoughts.

Great.

“And it’s not a delusion,” he adds.

Sure.

“I’ll go next,” Van sighs, running a hand through his reddish-brown hair. “I’m Vangrennoth. Lust demon. I’m three-hundred twenty-eight, and I...” He grimaces and shoots a nasty look in Akor’s direction, but mohawk man only smiles. “I like watching romantic comedies.”

The other guys burst into laughter.

“No fucking way!” Akor holds his sides and laughs like this is the best thing he’s ever heard.

Personally, I think it’s kind of sweet. You know, for a murdering, crime-committing asshole.

“Shut up, dipshit. You go then,” Van growls. His pout juts out his sexy lower lip, and I want to snap a picture on my phone, which is upstairs and currently unable to save me. But damn. Every move he makes is Instagram perfect.

And I’m crazy. Ogling my would-be killer. I tear my eyes from him and force myself to look at someone else so that I can stay focused. Escape. Escape.

“Akor,” the demon with the pale pink-colored mohawk gives me a courtly bow, complete with rolling wrist flicks, “pain demon. Not sure how old. Don’t like to remember those things.” His eyes stab mine, and I realize that they are a beautiful striped blue, Jared Leto-level gorgeous. “My secret is that I wish I was any other kind of demon...because I know I’m the worst of them all.”

You could hear a pin drop after his announcement. The truth of his belief weighs down the room.

Even if he is crazy, the self-loathing is evident. He’s a broken man.

His eyes then flicker to the giant. “Come on, Kastros. Your turn. Go ahead, take your time.”

I glance over at Kastros, who looks like a Hispanic bodybuilder. His golden skin and black hair are backlit by the skylight in our front hall. He has a mustache and a goatee that are cropped close.

He doesn't open his mouth to speak. He just stares down at me.

Zolroth grabs an orange off the ground and hurls it at Akor, who doesn't bother to move. The fruit smashes into his chest with a loud *thunk*, and he just laughs. Manically.

"Apologies, he can be a bit of a blighter." Zolroth fixes his cufflinks before pointing at the giant. "That's Kastros. He's a vengeance demon, so don't piss him off. He doesn't have a tongue, got it ripped out in a fight once, so he talks more with his fists than anything."

Kastros flexes said fists, and I flex my pelvic muscles, trying very hard not to piss myself at the thought of him in a fight. So, he's the muscle. My eyes flicker between Kastros and Akor, trying to decide who's most dangerous.

If I have to pick a killer...hopefully Kastros will make it fast. Akor seems like the kind to play with his—

"Will you give it a rest with this killer nonsense?" Zolroth rolls his eyes. "I'll have you know you have yet to shake my hand, which is rather rude."

He sticks his hand out again.

I want to laugh at his accusation. Because who broke into whose house? If we're measuring our rude dicks, his is bigger than mine.

Wait.

Every single one of them snickers.

Fuck my life. I glare at Zolroth, like this is all his fault, and I reach out and squeeze his hand hard. "Katrina." I give him my name, even though that's probably redundant, since they broke into my fucking house.

Asshole's red eyes land on my hand in Zolroth's, and those eyes seem to burn even brighter for a second.

I realize he's the only one who hasn't introduced himself, and I'm about to turn this rude bullshit right around when horns pop out of his head—long, curved black horns like a ram's—and I jump, squeaking in fright.

Because what kind of damned magician can do that? Colored contacts I get. But horns? Where could he even hide them? He didn't even move his hands!

Asshole shakes his head and walks away, going from the living room into the attached kitchen and opening the fridge, like he can't even stand the sight of me.

"Don't mind Raz," Zolroth says, giving my shoulders another squeeze.

"Akor, stop trying to look up her shorts," Van snaps.

I turn back to see Akor has dropped to the ground next to the couch. When the hell did he even get back? I swear he's a silent, sexy, mohawk-wearing ninja. He's on all fours like a dog, mohawk sideways and neck craned so he can peer up the bottoms of my silky turquoise sleep shorts.

Akor pouts. "You'd do it too."

The silent giant stomps over and yanks Akor up by the hair, which is so stiff it hardly even bends. As he does, black bat wings extend from his back. They're tipped with long black claws.

Internally, I reel. What the beejezus—

I shriek and try to hide behind Zolroth, using him as a shield. Eyes, horns, now wings?

When Zolroth dissolves in a puff of black smoke in front of me and then reappears on the other side of the room, standing next to gorgeous Van...I can't deny it anymore.

This isn't some Vegas magic show.

I make eye contact with the huge giant, who still holds a squirming Akor in his mitt of a hand. And then I do what any logical person would.

I shriek my fucking head off.

All the guys freeze.

Asshole—I mean Raz—is the first to act. He strides over and plants himself in front of me, startling me into silence.

His red eyes lock on me as he growls in a low voice that makes my spine tingle, “Say that you want us to leave.”

“I want you to leave,” I whisper, but something about his voice draws me closer. I step toward him.

“Say you don’t actually want that stupid spell to work,” he commands.

“I don’t want that stupid spell to work.”

“She’s lying.” Akor yanks his hair out of the silent giant’s hands. His mohawk tilts diagonally as he jabs a finger at me. “She doesn’t mean it.”

“Yes. Yes I do!” I don’t want anything to do with them. I want them out. Gone. I want this to just be a dream—

Raz says, “Tell us you want nothing to do with William.”

I stop dead. “Wait. What?”

Akor dances around the silent giant, skipping and saying, “You just have to stop wanting him, and we’ll disappear.”

“Or—”

My head whips sideways like it’s a tetherball tied to their voices. I stare at Van as he runs a hand through his unnaturally gorgeous reddish-brown hair. He brings his hand down to his lips and snarks, “Or we just get this over with. You want in this guy’s pants?”

A surge of heat engulfs my clit when he moves toward me like a lion stalking his prey. Fuck, how I wish he’d pounce and eat me.

No.

Wait. What am I thinking?

Raz growls.

Zolroth shakes his head. “Honestly,” he scolds the rest of them. He reaches out and gently grabs the crook of my arm, leading me away from all the others again, this time toward the French doors that lead to the backyard. I blink up at him, still dazed from the instant almost-orgasm I just had.

He, on the other hand, doesn't look dazed. He looks exactly like the sharks at my dad's office do when they're about to win a big case. He looks confident, in control, sure of himself, maybe even smug.

Zolroth says, "Look. We could leave. Or...we could complete the terms of the spell and help you win over this William guy. Make him yours."

My heart stops, and my eyes widen. It's like he's offering me a lifetime supply of chocolate—too good to be true. "What's the catch?" I ask, hesitantly. My parents didn't raise a fool. Well...they didn't really raise me at all, but still.

Zolroth gives a tiny grin. "No catch."

I cross my arms. "Mm-hm."

He leans in, and his breath washes over the shell of my ear as he whispers, "I think we can easily show William just what he's missing. I'd just need you to pretend to be my girlfriend for a bit. Think you could handle that?"

Pretend to be a demon's girlfriend?

I start to laugh, and I can't stop.

This is a joke. This has to be a joke.



WHEN THE “DEMONS” leave, I do what any sane woman would do—I bleach the shit out of my house with one bucket of water and one of Clorox. I mean for the water to be holy water, but since the nearest church is ten miles away, I settle for praying over the washcloth and hoping that’ll work instead.

Because, yeah, my panicked mind isn’t quite logical, okay?

My thoughts are racing in tandem to my rapidly beating heart as I pull myself from the floor, my legs bruised from how awkwardly I held myself, and hurry towards my room.

I can’t stay here. I can’t risk those...those *men* coming back. Because I don’t actually believe that they’re demons, right? That’s insane, and I learned a long time ago that the mind has a tendency to play cruel, horrible tricks on you.

Checking my phone, I see a one sentence text from my mom stating she won’t be home tonight. Apparently, she and Dad have to travel to the city to meet with a client.

Well, fuck this. And fuck them. And fuck the men who claim they are “demons.”

With an almost blistering speed, I pack one bag for myself and one bag for Adam. Then I hurry out the front door and across the lawn interspersed with tall maples and perfectly manicured bushes.

Mrs. Johnson's house rests on the other side of a neatly trimmed hedge, the floor-to-ceiling windows radiating a copious amount of light. The old bat currently resides on the porch, rocking in her ancient-looking chair. Adam sits on the steps in front of her, happily licking an ice cream cone. When he sees me, he drops his cone, white liquid splattering across the distressed wooden boards. Mrs. Johnson makes a face as she narrows her shrewd, all-seeing eyes.

"Have fun with your orgy?" the old woman asks snidely. I theorize she's approaching eighty, maybe even ninety, but she's too stubborn to move into a nursing home. Hell, I'm pretty sure she hasn't even hired a live-in nurse, despite her children's insistence that she should. Her body is frail, betraying her true age, and numerous wrinkles crease her face. Her white hair is curled around an ashen face. At one point, she made an effort to dye her hair some extravagant color every other week. The older she gets, the less shits she gives. I strive to be like her someday.

"Thank you for watching him, Mrs. Johnson," I say politely, ignoring her curt tone. She huffs, rolling her eyes, but her expression immediately softens when she sets eyes upon my brother.

"Well...the little shit is welcome to come back anytime," she croaks out, leaning forward to ruffle his hair. Adam grins toothily at her before interlocking his fingers with mine.

"Where are we going, Katty?" he questions, using his usual nickname for me. "Where are my new friends?" He pushes up on his tiptoes, as if he can find the guys lurking behind the bushes.

Oh fuck. What if they are?

That thought spurs me into action.

Ignoring Mrs. Johnson's probing question about my apparent orgy, I tighten my grip on Adam's hand and drag him towards my car. I keep a booster seat in the trunk for this exact reason; we can never trust my parents to take Adam to appointments or school or...I don't know... actually fucking parent.

“Where are we going?” he asks, blinking up at me with wide-eyed innocence. What I wouldn’t give to be like him. To see the world through a rose-colored lens that obscures the darkness and transforms it into pretty lights.

“Away,” I answer briskly. There’s no way in hell I’m staying in this house a moment longer. I’ll call the security company and demand they change the locks. And then I’ll threaten castration for allowing these “demons” access to my home in the first place.

Why didn’t the alarm go off? It should have.

Logically, they must be rivals of my parents. Maybe they were sent to scare us? But my parents don’t know jack-shit about William. Are Stacy and David playing a prank on me? Stacy has our alarm code. Or maybe someone else from school? Maybe the entire school? I turn those theories over and over in my head, each one gaining more traction.

Yes, that’s the most sensible explanation, after all. A prank. Nothing more.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, knuckles whitening, as I back the car out of the driveway and head to...

Where?

Where can I possibly go?

I could drive to my parents’ law firm and tell them about the encounter, but a nagging voice in my head whispers that they wouldn’t care. They would probably be more pissed at me for disturbing them than anything else.

Biting my lower lip hard enough to draw blood, I drive with no destination in mind. All I know for certain is that I need to get away. I need to escape the demons nipping at my heels.

When my car stops in front of a gaudy, two-star motel, I don’t hesitate before pulling into a parking space. Adam is sleeping in the backseat, blissfully unaware.

Should I call the police?

They didn't technically hurt me, but they had broken into my house. If it was a prank, I would feel horrible if I got them arrested. Though, they kind of deserve it. I mean, I had to drain that entire fake plant of nearly an entire pot of coffee.

But if what they said was true, if they're truly demons...

No! Don't be ridiculous, Katrina. Since when do you believe in the supernatural?

Taking a deep, calming breath, I wake Adam up, and together, the two of us walk towards the lone building designated as reception. My hand trembles as I give the worker my credit card. Hopefully, my parents won't look at my statement anytime soon. I would have to have a rather uncomfortable conversation on why I chose to rent a hotel room for seemingly no fucking reason.

Then again, them thinking I had hotel sex is better than the alternative.

"Why are we here?" Adam queries, bouncing on the balls of his feet. His eyes are bright with excitement. "Are we on vacation?"

"Yes," I answer immediately as I accept the room key and exit the building. The November air is cool, the wind blowing my pink tresses away from my face.

"Is there a pool? Can we go in it?" Adam continues to fire off question after question as I find our door at the end of the hall. Using the key card, we step into a sparsely furnished room with two twin-sized beds, two nightstands flanking them, and a chunky television situated on a wooden stand. The green carpeting contrasts greatly with the eggshell white walls. At the very end of the room, a golden light is on to reveal a modest bathroom consisting of a sink, bathtub, and toilet.

This place is swanky. And by swanky, I mean it looks like it's full of diseases. Damn. I briefly wish I'd brought my own sheets... Why didn't I think of that? Nope. Focus. We're safe. Now, I need to make sure we stay that way.

"I call this bed!" Adam announces immediately, plopping down on the mattress closest to the television. I don't bother arguing as he grabs the

remote from the stand and flicks through the channels.

Heart juddering in my chest, I make quick work contacting the security company and demanding they change the locks. They promise to have a man come by this afternoon, but they also assure me that their records show no signs of a break-in.

I have no idea how that's possible, and when I ask, the line goes deathly silent for a moment.

"I'm afraid we don't have an answer to that," the accented man states. "But nothing shows up on the security cameras, and no alarms were triggered."

I'm going insane. It's official. I'm going completely insane. Oh God. Soon, I'm going to be in a loony bin, forced to wear a straightjacket.

Exhaustion begins to creep in like a dark fog curling around the edges of my vision. With Adam preoccupied with *Paw Patrol*, I allow my eyelids to flutter closed, sleep claiming me.



WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER A DREAM SANS ZIEL, THE SKY is still dark, a canvas of velvety blackness broken apart by slivers of moonlight. I groan, twisting in my bed, and wearily open up one eyelid.

A string of expletives leaves my lips as I see the time on the digital alarm clock.

Seven twenty-three AM.

Fuck! I slept longer than I thought I would. It's already morning...and we have less than ten minutes until school begins.

"Adam!" I say urgently, throwing back my covers and grabbing his duffle bag. "Wake up, sweetheart."

He murmurs something inarticulate, hair wildly tousled, but reluctantly sits up and blinks at me.

“We’re running late. Can you get dressed for me?” I ask, tossing him a pair of pants and his favorite dinosaur shirt from a bag I’d thrown together for us.

His brows furrow, sleep still evident in his haggard face, but he complies without complaint.

“Don’t forget to use the bathroom and brush your teeth!” I direct as I stumble into my own academy-issued uniform—white blouse, blue pleated skirt, and matching blue jacket. The academy crest is imprinted onto the shoulder, depicting two swords crossed. Real original, I know.

I don’t bother to wear makeup today. Hell, I don’t even bother to brush my hair. Instead, I braid it away from my face quickly, hoping that I don’t look like a complete and utter mess.

“Come on!” I instruct as I throw our clothes into our suitcases at random. I didn’t bother to pay for more than one night here. I’m hoping the new locks will be in place by now, and I can enjoy tonight in my own bed. My own, sperm-free, germ-free bed. Sounds like heaven.

I hurry towards the car, buckle Adam in, then speed towards his preschool, fortunately located only a few minutes away from Lakewood Prep, the fancy private school my parents pay for me to attend.

“Running a little late, are you, girly?” Sasha Loo raises a blonde brow as I hurry through the door, breathing ragged and sweat plastering stray strands of hair to my head. I’ve always liked Sasha, one of the three teachers of Lakewood Preschool. She’s only a few years older than me and has a witty sense of humor.

“Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!” I gasp as I pull Adam along after me. “I forgot to set an alarm.”

As soon as Adam sees his friends, he races away from me, a smile lighting up his face. A tiny pang shoots through me at how easily he can dismiss me, but I push that voice away. He’s a kid, and despite all I do for him, I’m not his mother. It’s just...hard.

“Hurry to class, girly. We have him!” Sasha waves me away dismissively, and after thanking her profusely, I hurry back to my car. Hopefully, I’ll get

to school in time for second period.

And hopefully, the office ladies won't call my parents.

This late, I'm forced to park in Nowhere Land, a good walk from the main building.

Cursing, I grab my backpack from the backseat, lock my car, and hurry towards the main office.

Lakewood Prep is exactly how you would picture a prestigious private school. Everything seems...more. I don't know how to eloquently articulate what I mean, but even the bricks composing the main academic building seem newer. Cleaner. Only the best for us rich pricks, am I right?

Fortunately, the receptionist doesn't question my late appearance. After signing in, she hands me a pass and instructs me to head straight to my second period class.

I've never been late in my life. Ever. I have perfect attendance. I even went to school when my appendix was threatening to burst—though I wouldn't recommend doing that.

I'm panting by the time I make it to AP World History, a class that's annoyingly on the other side of the building from the front entrance. It's also one of the few classes I have with William.

Smoothing down my wayward strands of hair—so as to not look like a clown that has been peed on, stomped on, and then run over by a clown car—I take another deep breath.

You got this, Katrina. You got this.

With that mental pep talk, I stride into my classroom, an apology already on the tip of my tongue when Mr. White turns towards me. But that apology dies on my lips when I see a new student sitting in the seat beside mine. A new, *familiar* student.

Zolroth flashes me a smile, pearly white teeth on display, and I swear a part of my soul shrivels up and dies a painful death.

Fuck. Me.



IT'S OFFICIAL—I'M going to sell all of my earthly belongings and move to Costa Rica. Why? No reason, but I'm pretty sure anywhere is better than here.

Zolroth looks like a Greek god coming to smite us undeserving, lowly servants. His dark, flawless skin practically shines in the artificial lights, and his even darker, buzzed hair showcases a face that makes angels weep. He's wearing the standard academy uniform, but no one with eyes could possibly mistake him for a student. He's just...better. Better than anyone in this school, if I'm being completely honest. Handsomer. Larger. Sexier. He's sin and sex personified. Ironic, considering that he claims to be a freaking demon. I wouldn't believe that by looking at him. Everything about him—from his elegant facial features, to his lush lips, to his muscular body—seems to be hewn from heavenly grace...or whatever they use up there to make angels.

One thing is certain—Zolroth is bad for my soul. And my ovaries, but we're not going to talk about that.

The class begins to whisper amongst themselves, staring up at me with amusement, and I realize I'm standing in the front of the room with my mouth hanging open. Mr. White clears his throat and quirks a brow in my direction.

“Miss Colt, are you alright?” he questions, and the class breaks into laughter, basking in my embarrassment. Zolroth continues to smile at me

blindingly from his seat in the back.

I can't help but notice William sitting near the front of the classroom. Unlike the others, he's watching me with concern instead of amusement, and somehow, that soothes my ravaged emotions.

"I...um..." I desperately volley my gaze between Mr. White, the lone empty seat, and Zolroth. The only empty chair in the room is right next to him. Is he stalking me? That's the only logical explanation. Surely, he's not actually a high school student. No one can possibly believe that shit, can they?

High school guys are awkward and rude and gangly. There's nothing gangly about Zolroth. He's got this posh sophistication, like he's one of those twenty-five-year-old actors that movies hire to play teenagers. But Mr. White doesn't give him a second glance. The teacher's hard eyes are only on me.

"Take a seat." Mr. White's tone brooks no room for argument. With only slight trepidation, I hurry down the aisle, my head ducked to avoid the leering and amused stares from my classmates.

I make sure to sit as far away from Zolroth as possible. Did the desks get closer together? Or am I imagining things?

And why, pray tell me, is he staring at me with that gorgeous, damning smile?

"Stop it," I hiss, fire entering my cheeks at his attention. I tell myself it's because he's a psycho stalker, and not because he's sex-on-a-stick. Definitely not the latter. Because he broke into my house!

At this point, I'm practically three-quarters off of the seat in my futile attempt to escape him. I'm afraid I'll blow away completely like dandelion fluff, scattered and shattered by one puff from his lips.

"It's nice to see you again, Katrina." His tone is as smooth as honey, and is that...? Is that an accent? There's a distinct lilt to his vowels that I haven't noticed before.

Do demons even have accents?

And why the fuck am I thinking like that? He's not a demon, just a deranged, psychotic man who apparently now goes to my school.

"Don't talk to me." I resist the urge to bare my teeth at him like a feral dog. I'm not gonna lie, I'm freaking the fuck out. Like, fetal-position and crying for a momma who wishes I died at birth type of freaking out. My heart is trying to tap dance its way through my ribs, and my palms are so sweaty that I'm afraid to wipe them on my skirt because I think they'll leave marks.

"Roth!" Mr. White's strident voice captures my stalker's attention. I can't help but notice that Zolroth's face twitches at the shortened version of his name. Oh...he hates it. That's good to know. From now on, I shall only call him Roth. Or just call the cops on him. That works too.

"Yes, Mr. White?" he inquires politely, clasping his hands together on top of his desk like some sort of stupidly sexy teacher's pet. When he moves, the thick muscles in his arms ripple, and I swear all of the girls—and even some of the boys—swoon in tandem.

Me? I don't swoon. Ever. Except for that one time when I saw William in a Speedo in gym class. I'll be the first to admit that I totally swooned at that visual.

"Can you start the reading on page two hundred and eighty-three, please?" Our teacher nods towards the standard AP World History textbook.

Zolroth smiles, a decidedly predatory and psycho smile, and nods.

"Of course." Flipping to the designated page, he begins to read, his smoky voice curling around me like a tightening leash. Why does his voice have to sound so...so...sexy? Like drinking bourbon on a warm summer day, the liquid sliding down your throat. And yes, I do drink, thank you very much. Well, I drank. Once. When I was fifteen. At a party Stacy threw. Anyway... There's something about Zolroth that seems to innately command—no, *demand*—my complete and utter attention. He's like a drug, one that I wish to dispel from my system. I'll hate myself forever if I become one of those girls who believes her stalker is sexy.

Though he is... Sexy, I mean.

And my stalker.

Thus, he's a sexy stalker.

Stop it, Katrina! I mentally berate myself, dropping my head into my hands.

Demon or no demon, I refuse to let Zolroth get to me. He's a pest, one that I need to exterminate. If he thinks he can stalk me without repercussions, he has another thing coming.



WILLIAM WAITS FOR ME IN THE HALLWAY WHEN I EXIT THE CLASSROOM, Zolroth a healthy distance behind me, having been stopped by Mr. White.

My heart judders in my ribcage as I feast my eyes on the sheer perfection that is William Washington. Today, the first few buttons of his shirt are undone, showcasing his toned chest and a splatter of blond chest hair. His face is sun-kissed, his honey-brown eyes penetrating my skin and seeing directly into my soul. Remember how I said I don't swoon? That's a complete and utter lie. I'm totally swooning right now.

"Hey, are you okay?" he questions, leaning against the nearest locker. It probably belongs to someone in desperate need of his or her books, but no one would dare tell William to move. "I don't think I've ever seen you late to class before." He smiles, and I swear the sky opens up and I can see into Heaven itself. It's a genuine smile, unlike Zolroth's prickish one.

"I...um..." I awkwardly rock on the balls of my feet, struggling to articulate my words. Should I be witty or sincere? Funny or flirty? A mixture of all of the above?!? "I ate a bad taco."

I. Ate. A. Bad. Taco.

That is what I come up with.

Fuck my mouth. And while I'm on the "fuck you" thought process, fuck Zolroth too. I'm totally blaming him for the painfully awkward word diarrhea.

William's face creases in sympathy, but I can't help but notice the glimmer of disgust in his eyes. "Oh. That's awful. I'm...sorry."

I'm sorry too.

"It...um...wasn't fun." Now, a normal person would stop there. Accept the loss. But this girl? This girl, apparently, has a horrible disease of talk-out-of-her-ass-itis. "A lot of bathroom trips. All morning. You could say I've been visited by a demon."

William's face grows significantly paler the longer I talk, until he appears ashen and almost sickly.

Stop talking, Katrina.

"Had to leave my house," I blurt. "Got a hotel room. Because of the...bad taco," I finish lamely, forking my fingers through my vibrant pink hair. Why the hell does my brain do this? It's torture. Full-on demonic torture. I swear, ninety-nine percent of the time, I'm a fully-functioning individual. It's whenever I see William that I just can't seem to word.

"That's—"

I never get to hear what William thinks of my taco incident.

His eyes widen suddenly as he stares at something over my shoulder. I don't need to look to know that *he* is creeping up behind me like some sort of parasitic beast.

"Hey, Katrina," Zolroth rumbles, his voice an almost physical caress over my skin. I try my damndest not to shiver as goosebumps skitter up and down my arms. "I'd be willing to take that tour now." He moves to stand directly beside me, his arm brushing mine with every breath he takes.

"Huh?"

What the bloody fuck is he talking about now? And why the hell is my brain using British curse words?

Is this a new stalker method? Confuse the shit out of your stalkee?

“What?” William asks sharply, eyes narrowing into slits. He stares between the two of us, dozens of questions bubbling to life in his vibrant, honey eyes. I could be mistaken, I usually am, but it almost appears as if he’s jealous.

But that’s comical, right?

William Washington would never be jealous over me.

“Katrina here agreed to give me a tour of the school,” Zolroth continues in that charming accent of his. I mean, that disgusting accent of his that makes me want to vomit.

I’m too flabbergasted to contradict him.

What the what of the what?

William’s lips purse delicately as he stares at me intently, almost as if he has just seen me clearly for the first time in his life.

“Oh. I see you. I guess I’ll talk to you later, Katrina?” His voice starts off confident, cocky almost, but it wavers towards the end, turning the statement into a tentative question.

“Oh, yeah. Definitely. We can’t really talk in gym, but AP Lit will be lit.” And then, to add fuel to my shame fire, I fist pump the air. Because I’m just that horrifically awkward.

AP Lit will be lit?!? Really?

I’m dimly aware of Zolroth grabbing my elbow, his touch tantalizingly soft, as he steers me in the opposite direction of William Washington, aka the love of my life.

“What...what?” I finally muster enough willpower to wrench my arm away from Zolroth’s. “What the fucking hell are you doing?”

“Granting your wish, of course,” Zolroth responds with a soft smile. “You want that William guy to love you, correct?”

“What? No!” Heat engulfs both of my cheeks, and I cast a glance in both directions to ensure no one has overheard his statement. Fortunately, the

halls have emptied out, and even William has retreated to his third hour class, one of the few he shares with me. “Keep your voice down, will you?” I hiss, quickening my pace.

Third period for me is gym class—the bane of my existence. I envy the men and women capable of running a full mile without going into cardiac arrest. Seriously, mad respect from me. Our gym teacher, Mr. Harthorne, is a hardass who once served in the U.S. Marines. Since he retired ten years ago, he decided his skills were better served in torturing high school students.

When Zolroth continues to keep pace with me, that damn, unrepentant smile firmly in place, I cast him a glare capable of curdling milk. “Why are you following me?”

“We have third hour together,” he responds cheekily. When I stop walking and stare up at him, dumbfounded, he boops my nose.

Boops my freaking nose.

Gracing me with another one of his stupidly perfect smiles, he continues walking in the direction of the gym. After a brief moment of hesitation, I hurry to keep pace with him. Since we went in the opposite direction of William, we’re forced to take the long way through the halls. I have to endure an extra two minutes with my hideously sexy tormenter.

“I meant, why are you stalking me? Why are you here?”

He rolls his eyes as if my questions are nothing but an annoying inconvenience. “I told you, sweetheart. You summoned us, and we can’t leave until we grant your wish.”

“First, don’t call me sweetheart.” I shudder at the term of endearment. Just who does this fucker think he is? Sure, he’s sexy as hell (pun unintended), but he’s also certifiably insane. “And second, I didn’t summon you, because demons aren’t real, and thus, you’re not a demon.”

Logic, my friends.

A nagging voice in my head conjures up images of Asshole’s—excuse me, Raz’s—red eyes and those keen horns protruding from the top of his head.

I sweep those images beneath the proverbial rug, happy to live in denial for a moment longer.

We're silent the rest of the way, but I can feel Zolroth's eyes on me like a brand—the type used to mark cattle. That's what I am to him, after all. Prey. He's the big, nasty predator, and I'm nothing but the trembling, terrified little girl who he thinks he can destroy.

Not today, Satan. Not today.

Without bidding him a goodbye, I hurry into the girl's locker room, only breathing easier when he's completely out of view.

“Did you see him?”

The whispered words float to me as I change out of my uniform and into the school-issued shorts and T-shirt combo.

Are they talking about Zolroth? Because, yes, I most definitely saw him.

“He's so hot,” another girl exclaims with a giddy laugh.

“Off-limits,” a third voice snipes. “Too bad, though. I would ride him for days.”

Off-limits?

My confusion grows as Stacy hurries into the locker room and opens up the locker beside mine. As she changes into her gym uniform, I notice that she forgoes a bra, her nipples on display through the thin shirt. Come to think of it...all of the girls are choosing not to wear a bra today.

“Did you see him?” my best friend whispers with a nervous laugh.

“Zolroth?” I question. I know that we're a small school, but I'm surprised news already traveled this fast.

But when Stacy's brows furrow in confusion, I realize there's more going on than I initially expected.

And that scares the shit out of me.

“No, I meant Mr. Dämon.”

“Mr. Dämon?” I repeat in disbelief. I get goosebumps all over my arms, and the taco lie feels like it might become a reality as my stomach gurgles nervously. Does she realize that *dämon* is German for demon? Or am I the only one who decided to take German instead of Spanish this semester?

“The new gym teacher!” She practically bounces on her feet. Pausing abruptly, she gives my chest a disapproving once-over. “And I would recommend taking that off.”

Ignoring her super-duper helpful advice, I follow the line of girls into the gymnasium. Normally, they’d be dragging their feet, coming up with any excuse possible to sit out of class. Periods. Cramps. Dead grandmas. You name it, we use it.

Today, though, not one girl is huddling in the locker room, pretending to be sick. The bleachers are completely full by the time I drag myself to my usual seat near the back.

I spot Zolroth sitting on the opposite side of the room, surrounded by fawning girls, and he lifts his hand to wave when he spots me. I stubbornly turn away, lips compressed in a thin line.

William sits a few rows in front of me. His body is twisted, almost as if he has been watching me, and I feel heat enter both of my cheeks at his attention. He’s so beautiful that it’s sometimes a physical pain to look at him. He opens his mouth as if he’s going to say something—maybe invite me to sit beside him?—but he quickly clamps it closed as a new voice reverberates through the gym.

“Mr. Harthorne has been called away for the foreseeable future. I’ll be your new gym teacher until he returns,” a rough, growly voice announces, and my breath catches.

Raz—the asshole leader of the crazies, who rifled through my mail—storms out of an office, face contorted into a hideously beautiful sneer. His hair is slicked back, and though he’s wearing sweat pants and a white T-shirt that are standard Lakeside Prep-issue, it doesn’t diminish his natural, raw sex appeal. The fact that his T-shirt looks two sizes too tight and the tips of his angel wing tattoos can be seen cresting the collar is driving the girls in class wild, I’m sure. He has that naughty teacher-vibe going.

His eyes trail over the gathered students before landing on me. When he smiles, it's not nice. There's something cruel and malicious in that upwards tilt of his lips, something that causes the tiny hairs on my arms to stand on end.

You know that saying, "stalkers deserve to be kicked in the nuts?" No? You don't know it?

Well, I really, really wish I could kick both Raz and Zolroth in the nuts. Then I'd call the cops and move myself and Adam as far away from them as possible.

Costa Rica has never looked more promising.



P.E. CLASS HAS ALWAYS BEEN my idea of torture, but today's lesson takes that torture to a whole new level.

Mr. Dämon's eyes feel like they're burning when they land on me, and I'm torn between screaming "stalker" and trying to convince people he's a horny bastard (the demonic horns-on-head style of horny that's scary instead of the type of horny that's fun). But I honestly don't think people would believe me either. I mean...*me*. With stalkers? Ha. Even I have trouble believing that, and I've been running from them since yesterday. As for the other thing...well, that kind of declaration might get me sent to the school counselor.

Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt. Burned it.

"Listen up," Raz, aka Mr. Dämon, calls out, not bothering to use the dorky red whistle he's got looped on a string around his neck. But he doesn't need it, because every girl in the place immediately freezes, and when they stop talking, so do the guys, who seem delighted by the nipples parade thing going on today. Mr. D—for douchebag demon—continues, "We're apparently required by the state to have a *dance* unit." He grimaces while titters and applause break out on the bleacher around me.

I turn to look at Stacy, about to mutter that I'm probably going to attempt fake cramps, but her face is slack-jawed with puppy-like adoration.

Oh, shit. Is that what I look like around William? Ew. How can he even stand the sight of me? I try to be a good friend and help push her mouth closed, but she just waves me off.

“Stop it!” she grumbles.

So I recline back on my elbows and wonder why God decided to torture me with two hot stalkers at my school, who seem bound and determined to make the impossible happen. Two, wait. There were five. Where are the others?

I sit up and glare daggers at Zolroth, who’s staring right at me. If any one of those bastards is at Adam’s school, I’ll kill them. I have half a mind to ignore Mr. D and stomp over and demand the truth from “Roth,” since he’s the less intimidating of the two.

I imagine grabbing his collar and forcing him to tell me.

And...I realize that Mr. D has been calling my name. Several times.

Shit.

My cheeks glow hot pink as I stand slowly, unsure what the hell he wants.

“Well, get down here,” he growls as he tucks the attendance sheet into his pocket.

My eyebrows shoot up into my forehead. All the eyes of my classmates trace over me, the girls’ with jealousy and the guys’ with amusement. I don’t dare look at William, because if I do, I just know I’m going to miss the next step and go flying face first onto the basketball court.

I come to a hesitant stop in front of Mr. D. I cross my arms and stare up at him, trying but failing to intimidate him with defiance.

He just chuckles, his light blue eyes dark and his expression borderline cruel. “Hands out, Ms. Colt.” I stick my hands out at my sides like I’m being crucified. I’m pretty certain that’s what’s about to happen. He’s going to kill me in front of an audience and—

His huge hands skate over mine, and he flips them palm down. His rough palms slide underneath mine. He doesn’t clasp our fingers, just lets my

fingers rest lightly on his. And all of a sudden, my body is thrumming with awareness...just from those hands. They are warm and huge, and my skin tingles where it touches his.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Raz mutters.

"You shouldn't be here," I growl in response.

"I agree." His fingers curl slightly and scratch lightly over my palms. Then he announces to the class, "Men will put their right foot out to the side like this, women their left foot. Then stick your toe in the air and touch with your heel. Tap down your toe. Heel. Toe."

I stare down at his foot in disbelief. There's a demon in my gym class. Doing the polka. With me.

WHAAAAT is happening?

I blink rapidly. "I need to go to the nurse's office," I whisper, thinking it best to enact my earlier plan. Maybe I'm seeing things that aren't there. Just like after the accident when I lost my hearing.

"Nope. If I have to live through this shit, so do you," Mr. D commands softly.

"You don't have to," I hiss.

"You're the one who cast a damn spell," he retorts. Then he announces, "Now, you slide, slide, slide to the men's right, girl's left." And, I shit you not, we skip sideways holding hands. I see Raz's eyes flash red as we do, and that's the only reason I don't yank my hands back, grab my stomach, and run from the room screaming, "Cramps!" Because it really is punishing him as much as it is me. And if anything, after my panic in the wake of his visit, I think a little payback is in order.

We skip to his right. Then we do the heel, toe, heel, toe thing again and skip back the other direction. After that, we stop. I stare up at him and watch the ring around his pupils turn a smoldering lava red before he takes a breath, calms himself, and is able to say, "Now. We clap."

"Like second grade girls?" I ask.

Because, apparently, I don't want to live as much as I thought I did the other day.

His hands curl into fists, and I grin up at him. "This is so fun, Mr. D!" I lift my hands up so he can high-five them.

But he turns suddenly and pulls the attendance sheet from his pocket. "William Washington! Get down here!"

Oh shit. Kill me now.

Seriously.

It would be a mercy killing.

William slides into place where Raz used to be, smiling softly. He puts his hands up and gently taps them against mine as Raz instructs him what to do.

I'm frozen like a statue as William's sweaty palms smack mine repeatedly. He's touching me. He's touching me! But for some reason, maybe because his hands are so sweaty, I don't get the strange tingles.

Maybe it's a demon thing. Maybe my body was warning me against touching Raz. That had to be it.

I blow out a tense breath, trying not to humiliate myself as I do the world's stupidest dance with William Washington and attempt to simultaneously memorize every second of it for my mental shrine.

It's going perfectly. The gym fades away. The scent of sweat and floor polish diminishes. The giggles and grumbles of our classmates disappear. It's just William and I skipping sideways, hand in hand. I see his eyes slip down to my bouncing chest, and his teeth bite down on his bottom lip, which only increases the butterflies in my stomach. He just checked me out!

Fuck yes!

I love Raz. This is amazing. Best day ever! But when a smile spreads unbidden across my lips, that's when Raz rips William away.

The look on his face is pure loathing. “Laps! Now! We don’t try to stare down classmates’ shirts!”

“I...sir, I didn’t!” William stutters.

Raz just vibrates with fury and points toward the corner of the gym. “Go.” Then he turns to the room at large and yells, “Everyone down here. And if I see so much as a hint of inappropriate activity, you’ll join Mr. Washington!”

What. The. Fuck?

These demons promised they were going to help me win William over. So what the hell was that?



I STOMP THROUGH THE HALLWAY, MY HAIR UP IN A WET BRAID AFTER showering off, squeezing my backpack with a death grip that could throttle a snake. Raz forced me to partner with Zolroth four times. Four! And he made William run laps the rest of class.

Evil.

Duh, demons are evil. Yes. I know. I’m kicking myself for momentarily thinking they were actually gonna help me out.

Of course, I couldn’t say anything to Raz or Zolroth without looking like I was nuts, but I’d stabbed the latter with my eyes repeatedly. He’d just grinned at my frustration, the fucker, leaning down and whispering, “I like it when you look sassy.”

I may or may not have pretended to stumble so I could stomp on his toes.

Stacy trots next to me, oblivious to the fact that I’m steaming like Mount Vesuvius. “I still can’t believe he picked you to demonstrate, lucky bitch!”

David walks up behind us and slides an arm around her. “Who’s a lucky bitch?”

“Katrina got to dance with our hot new gym teacher!”

“Not hot,” I mutter, but nobody listens to me.

“Dude! Did you hear the gossip about that? Supposedly, Mr. Harthorne and that counselor chick, Ms. Simmons, got caught doing it on her desk during school hours.” David gives us an exaggerated grossed out facial expression, which I’m pretty sure we all mimic, because Mr. Harthorne was a man in desperate need of a nostril hair trimmer.

But, that reminds me, Ms. Simmons was supposed to write me a letter of recommendation for several colleges I’d applied to. Harvard, Yale, Princeton—but only if I didn’t get into the other two—all the ‘right’ colleges, according to Mom and Dad. I don’t even know what I want to major in, but Lord forbid I fail to try.

I peel away from the pair and push through the cross traffic, anxious freshmen still sorting out their social pecking order and a couple of sophomores who are busy tossing a nerf football in the halls.

“Where are you going?” Stacy calls out behind me.

But I arrive at the counselor’s door just then. I point at it, then yank it open. Stace knows how my parents get about college stuff and how often I’ve had to go to this annoying office, so she just waves and turns to walk off with David.

I stride into the small, utilitarian waiting room, surprised to find it crowded. A lot of seniors are squashed into the small space, girls and guys chattering in low tones. Are they all like me? Are they worried about their letters? I can’t see over the heads of the tall guys or the girls wearing heels. I try to peer between them, but it’s impossible. I yank out my phone to see how much time I have before the next bell, thinking I’ll come back later.

But that’s when I hear a voice.

A familiar one.

No fucking way.

I shove through the other students, apologizing awkwardly as I go. “I’m sorry. It’s an emergency. Excuse me.”

One guy pushes me back, but instead of falling, a hand catches mine and yanks me forward. I find myself falling into a brown sweater vest. It cushions my cheek, and I'm grateful for it, because if I'd fallen right into the hard six pack I can feel beneath it, I might have bruises.

I awkwardly use my hands to shove myself upright so that I can glare at the new counselor, who smirks down at me.

"Did you have an appointment?" Van's smooth voice makes my nipples pebble. Or is it the way his five o'clock shadow frames his jaw? Or the twinkle in his eyes? Or those perfect shoulders? Or...

I realize I'm blinking dumbly at him, and I force myself to snap out of it. *Lust demon, Kat*, I scold myself. It's not real. I glance around me at the stupefied students and realize that all of them, even the guys, look just as entranced as I did a second ago.

How dare he!

"Yes, I have an appointment," I growl, marching into Ms. Simmons's former office with an irritated authority that's new to me. New since meeting these overbearing, romance-ruining demons, anyway.

Well, I'm done. I mean it. I couldn't say a damn thing in front of my other teachers when Zolroth showed up. I couldn't chew out a new teacher in front of my entire gym class. But I can damn well scream my head off in the counselor's office.

I throw my bag down forcefully and take a seat in the crappy blue plastic chair for students. It's not really meant to be comfortable. I've always felt like that was deliberate, so that the counselors can get us in and out as fast as possible.

Van trails in slowly after me, raising a hand and running it through his auburn hair. The movement causes his sweater to hike up a little and reveal a patch of his stomach. I avert my eyes, not wanting to see that, and realize that four other students have crowded into the room.

I stand and whip around. "Get. Out. Now." My growl has the intended effect. Their eyes snap from Van to me, and they slowly back away. I

follow them to the door and latch it behind me, not giving a shit about school rules or propriety at this moment.

When I release the doorknob, I clench my fists so hard that my knuckles go white. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Van leans against the front of his desk and casually crosses his feet at the ankles. He smiles at my fury like the asswipe demon I know him to be. Instead of rising to the bait, I glare at the computer so his stupid sexiness won’t distract me.

“We’re here to help you.” Van’s tone is magnanimous. Like some damn king gifting a peasant with his presence.

“Well, you’re not helping. I want you out. All of you!”

“Sorry, no can do. You summon, we respond. It’s how demons work.”

I step forward, livid, my entire body shaking with anger as I get in his face. “I’m changing the rules.”

He laughs then. “Oh, sweetie. You don’t know anything about our rules. Now that we’re here, we’re going to make sure William falls in love with you, whether you still want him to or not.”



I'M FUCKING FUMING by the time I leave Van's office. The lobby is still crowded when I emerge, and I physically have to part the throng of students like freaking Moses did the Red Sea.

I don't bother to head to my next class. Instead, I stalk towards the parking lot, easily able to bypass the lone security guard they have patrolling the school grounds.

Stupid, sexy demons ruining my life. I hope they choke on their own cocks.

Muttering inarticulate phrases in my head, I unlock my car and practically launch myself inside of it.

"Fuck!" I bellow, the muscles in my shoulders so tense, they physically spasm, the full reality of my situation wreaking havoc on my insides.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I pound my fists against the steering wheel as darkness encroaches the edges of my vision.

Why do these things happen to me? I'm a good girl, at least, I believe myself to be one. I don't lie or steal or cheat or intentionally hurt people. I'm compassionate, and I go out of my way to help others.

So, why me?

Why me?

That question reverberates through my head as I back out of the parking space and drive in the opposite direction of town.

I found this spot with Adam when I first got my license a few years ago. We had been driving aimlessly when we stumbled upon a dirt road surrounded by trees—tall, spindly maples interspersed with oaks.

The road came to a stop in front of a silver gate, and from there, we walked on foot to a gorgeous swath of land overlooking a tranquil pond. A single log sat at the edge of the water, inconsistent weather corroding away the rough bark until it was smooth to the touch.

I go to our special spot, choosing to leave my backpack in the car. I shove my phone into my skirt pocket—the only saving grace of the atrocious uniforms—and lock the car. Quickly, I stride through the narrow path overrun by weeds.

It's not overly chilly today; the light jacket I'm wearing is easily able to quell the cold. The trees are beginning to look skeletal, numerous piles of decaying brown leaves outlining the path.

When I arrive at the clearing, the water is glistening in the ambient sunlight like thousands of diamonds have been spread across the surface. It's beautiful and tranquil, the exact opposite of my life.

With a huff, I drop myself onto the lone log, my feet hovering inches from the water.

How is this happening?

That one question plays on repeat in my head, but I don't have an answer. It's surreal to think that not only are demons real, but a group of them are stalking me. A legion? A guild? A flock? Fuck, I need to update myself on demon mythology. Is that something you can just google?

And then, the most important question, what am I going to do?

I've watched enough *Supernatural* episodes to know that demons can be exorcised. Do I contact a priest? Shoot them with salt bullets?

I huff out a dry, humorless laugh as I rub my hands on my skirt.

I'm being stalked by demons. Who would've thought?

"A penny for your thoughts?" Heart hammering a dangerous tune in my chest, I whirl on the intruder. Before I can respond—or, I dunno, scream—someone tosses a handful of pennies at my face.

"What the hell?" I jump to my feet, then frantically dislodge one of the copper pennies that has fallen down my bra.

Akor stands before me, his pink mohawk glinting in the late fall sun. He's shirtless, his broad chest covered in tattoos, and wearing a pair of low-slung sweatpants.

"I never liked that phrase," he muses as he stalks forward, every inch the languid house cat. "Why are we saying 'what' in correlation to 'hell?' Don't we know what hell is? And why is it '*the* hell' instead of just 'hell?' Shouldn't it be 'what hell?' As in, 'what fresh hell is this?'"

"What are you doing here?" I sputter, alarm coursing through me. "Were you following me?"

"Following. Stalking." He lifts his hand as if he's attempting to balance something in his palms. "Is there really a difference?" His mouth curls into a wide grin, and I have momentary flashes of Joker, Batman's archnemesi*s*. Is he *that* crazy?

I'm silent. I don't know how to respond. Part of me is terrified, but another part of me lights up at the fact that he's spent his morning secretly tracking me. Does that make me crazy too?

Akor dances forward on agile feet until he's mere inches from my face. His warm breath—smelling distinctly like spearmint—assaults my senses.

"Do you want to play a game?" he asks, dangling a pair of dice in front of my face.

"How did you know I was here?" I demand, not allowing this topic to drop. I would've noticed if someone had followed me, wouldn't I? The street was empty when I arrived, not a soul—or demon—in sight.

Akor shrugs his lithe shoulders, a mischievous smirk pulling up his lips. “Tracker,” he deadpans.

Tracker?!?!

What the fuck?

“Where?” I exclaim, rubbing at my arms. Did he inject something inside of me when I wasn’t looking? Oh, God. Do I have a bunch of nanobots running rampant through my bloodstream, set to explode at a moment’s notice?

“If I roll a six or lower between the two dice, I’ll leave you alone,” he continues, ignoring my outburst. “But if I get a seven or higher, we get to do what *I* want to do.” He laughs maniacally, the sound both simultaneously terrifying me and...arousing me, especially when he lifts his eyebrows and gives me a sultry look that just *dares* me. There’s something about Akor that innately demands my immediate attention, something dangerous and primal that calls to the darkest part of me.

“What if I refuse?” I cross my arms over my chest, refusing to be intimidated by this very tall, very sexy, very dangerous, and very, very crazy man. You know what? I totally should be intimidated. Maybe I’ll find the nearest corner and curl up in a fetal position.

Or maybe I’ll jump his naked body like a—

Down, girl. Down.

“If you refuse,” Akor’s breath stirs the hairs around my ear, “I’ll do it anyway.”

I don’t know what “it” he’s referring to. The gambling game? The task he wants me to do? Something else entirely? But that “it” kind of makes me want to piss my pants. Especially when he traces a finger down my neck, making the hairs rise on the back of it, but also making my pulse pound—for reasons I do not want to address, because they are clearly delusional and my body has a dysfunctional attraction to crazy.

“Fine,” I hiss, hurling daggers with my eyes at the two dice. “Roll.”

“Your wish is my command.” He throws the dice in the air—so high that I lose sight of the two little cubes in the glare from the sun—and a moment later, they pummel my head. I yelp and jump to the side as they land unceremoniously on the ground.

“Ohhhh. That’s too bad,” Akor purrs, and I stare in dumbfounded shock at the dice, which have a six and a five glaring back at me. Eleven. Akor’s choice.

Fuck.

“I don’t...” I begin, stumbling over the words. Helplessly, I shake my head back and forth. Not happening. This is not...

Who am I kidding? It’s totally fucking happening.

Akor’s grin is pure sin—if I didn’t believe he was a demon before, I sure as fuck do now.

“Do you like shopping?”

Are you serious? All that fear? For nothing? I smack a hand against my forehead. I’d been picturing slaughtering baby goats inside of a pentagram.

Shopping? We’re going fucking shopping?

Demons who play matchmaker, subject themselves to polka, and take teenage girls shopping have just invaded my life. Maybe I need to rethink my ideas on Heaven and Hell.



AKOR INSISTED WE TAKE MY CAR, THOUGH THAT COULD BE BECAUSE AKOR didn’t have one. I have no idea how the man got to me in the first place. Magic? Demon powers? Was he hiding in my trunk?

We get a lot of looks when we show up at the nearest mall, located thirty minutes away from town. And when I say a lot of looks, I mean *a lot*.

Akor doesn't exude raw sex like Van does, but he's certainly a sight to behold. With his blond hair styled artfully in a pink mohawk and the deliciously tight athletic shirt he squeezed into, he embodies a dangerous type of sexy that girls flock to.

It also doesn't help matters that the lunatic is singing at the top of his lungs. He's singing "Demons" by Imagine Dragons. I'm unsure if he's being humorous, ironic, or sincere. It's pretty hard to tell, just like with everything he does.

I'm not gonna lie, he has a pretty damn good voice. It's lower than I would've expected, with a sultry undertone. Any woman would be stupid not to glance his way. Even the men do when he jumps up on a mall bench and starts belting out the refrain.

Me? I stand awkwardly and self-consciously to the side, probably looking like the child he's nannyng, still in my pleated skirt and academy-issued jacket.

"Come on, dove!" He grabs my hand and practically drags me into an upscale store that sells everything from golden rings to wedding dresses.

My parents make a hefty sum of cash, and I, in turn, receive a pretty generous allowance for babysitting Adam. But the things in this store? Oh, yeah, I'd be grounded for life for spending that much, and that's saying something, because I'm pretty sure my parents forget I exist most days. Or they forget that they gave birth to me in the first place.

"Akor," I hiss, dragging my feet. "I can't afford anything here."

"Don't worry about it," the demon dismisses with a wicked grin. "I'll handle it."

Before I can mount another protest, a pretty sales clerk steps up to us. She's everything I'll never be and everything I sort of *want* to be. Outfitted in a teal skirt and blouse that accentuates her curves, she could be plucked straight from a high-fashion magazine. Her blonde hair is streaked with artificial silver highlights that emphasize her high cheekbones and grayish-blue eyes. Normally, that color would be forgettable, but she somehow manages to look like a freaking goddess.

“How can I help you today?” She directs her question at Akor, because why not? Honestly, I can’t even blame the poor woman for giving him her attention when the only other occupant in the room is me. If I didn’t know that he was batshit crazy and a literal demon from Hell, I’d probably do the same. Even though he looks like some punk-ass rocker, the confidence he emanates screams power and money.

Akor grabs my shoulder and positions me until I’m standing in front him, my back flush against his chest.

“My babe here wants some clothes. And jewelry. And any other fancy ass stuff you have.”

Babe?! The fuck?

The clerk—whose name tag reads Mindy—glances at me with barely veiled disdain.

Would it be odd if I mouthed “help” repeatedly? Because I totally feel as if I’m being held hostage by a demon.

“Of course,” she replies stiffly. Straightening her shoulders almost imperceptibly, she adds, “What can I get the munchkin?”

The munchkin? The fucking munchkin? As in a lollipop-toting short person terrorized by witches? That’s what she sees when she looks at me?

“Babe,” Akor whines, lowering his face until it’s against my neck. He begins to nuzzle the sensitive skin there, and try as I might, goosebumps ripple on my flesh. “How does she know the nickname you gave me when I pound into you at night?” He raises his voice in a poor impersonation of a female in ecstasy. “*Munchkin, give it to me harder! Right there, munchkin! Right there! Tap that clit! Dick me!*”

“Have you ever had sex before?” I hiss out of the corner of my mouth, too low for Mindy the model to hear. “No one says that.”

“How would you know?” he scoffs, his lips featherlight on my skin. “No man has ever plowed—”

“Moving on!” I screech, my voice rising two octaves. How the hell could he possibly know I’m a virgin? How?? Part of me wants to know. The other part is too scared to ask.

With an irritated look over my shoulder, I elbow Akor in the stomach and step away, focusing on the clerk. “I suppose we’re getting stuff.”

“Only the best for my lady girl friend but not girlfriend,” Akor drawls, this time slinging an arm over my shoulder. I immediately shrug it off and cast him a pointed glare. Hopefully, the demon understands my memo—hands off or balls off.

Because trust me, I won’t hesitate to take holy water to his testicles.

Shopping with Akor is...I don’t want to say pleasant, but it’s actually not horrible. Surprisingly, he has a keen eye for fashion and, in his words, “shiny things.”

“I’m not trying that on,” I retort as he holds up a skin tight purple dress that will barely cover my crotch. If I bend over even a tiny bit, the entire world will go into cardiac arrest. My ass cheeks will be the cause of death worldwide.

“Please!” Akor begs, pressing his hands together in a prayer position with the dress squeezed between them. “Pretty please with donuts on top.”

“No,” I insist. “Besides, aren’t you supposed to be helping with the whole William thing? He prefers something...classier.” I nod towards Mindy, who is packaging a sophisticated pantsuit that makes me look years older. I also picked out a gorgeous red dress, a silky blouse, a pair of golden earrings, and a stunning diamond necklace. I mean, if Akor is paying using his demon bucks or whatever, then why the hell not?

Akor’s eyes harden suddenly as he clenches his hand around the fabric. “Not everything is about fucking William,” he hisses, and for a brief moment, his irises turn crimson, the red bleeding into the pupils. Fear roots my feet to the ground as I stare at the demon before me.

Not a man. Never a man.

It’s time I remember exactly what I’m dealing with.

I need to tread carefully with all of the demons. They're a fucking minefield, and one wrong move will end in an explosion.

Don't make them your enemy, Katrina. Don't trust them.

"Fine," I concede with a grumble, and immediately, the red diminishes as if it never existed to begin with. He jumps up and down, clapping his hands together with a jovial grin. "I'll take the damn dress."

"And the lingerie?" he asks hopefully, nodding towards a silky, revealing...*thing* resting beside the outfits I already chose. Honestly, I don't even dare try it on. Some things are too terrifying, even for me.

"Don't push it." I grab the crinkled dress from his hands and, after a moment of hesitation, snatch the lingerie too. Maybe I'll wear it for William...

A wicked smile curls up my lips at the thought, and my stomach clenches in desire.

Would William be an attentive lover? Or would he be possessive and dominating?

Those thoughts flit through my head as I approach Mindy and add the newest articles of clothing to my purchases.

"Excuse me." Akor smiles with all the warmth of an arctic storm. He nods towards a collection of rings displayed in a glass case. "Can we see those?"

"Of course," Mindy coos, practically giving him fuck me eyes. For added effect, she winks suggestively, bending forward to reveal an ample amount of cleavage. She unlocks the display case and places the rings on the counter for Akor to inspect. "Anything else?"

There's no missing the suggestive undertone to her words.

I bristle. Excuse me, but she's flirting with my fake boyfriend. He outright told her we were fucking. So who the hell does she think she is?

My annoyance is a bit irrational, so I smash it down and pretend not to notice her anymore.

“That dress.” Akor points over his shoulder at random to a pretty—not gorgeous—blue, off-the-shoulder gown. “I want it in the next size up.”

Mindy’s lips compress into a line, but she concedes with a bob of her head. “Of course,” she replies stiffly, turning on her heel and stalking towards the back of the store, because this place doesn’t keep multiple sizes out front. No, that would be clutter.

“I don’t need any more,” I hiss as the crazy demon procures a quarter from his pocket.

“Heads we do it your way; tails we do it my way,” he states with a devilish grin.

“What do you mean?” I demand, but instead of answering, Akor merely throws the coin up into the air. When it lands on the back of his hand, his smirk widens until a glimmer of fear cascades down my spine.

“My way it is.” He shows me the back of the coin, his eyes a mixture of mayhem and merriment.

“Your way?”

I really, really don’t like the sound of this.

Without bothering to respond, Akor begins throwing clothes at me until I’m stumbling under their collective weight. He grabs one of the necklaces I picked out and slides it over my head, fingering the pendant that rests snugly between my breasts. His hand grazes the skin there, and my entire body locks together as if I’ve been electrocuted.

“Akor...” I warn as he hums cheerily beneath his breath. He grabs the ring collection Mindy set out...

And abruptly pours them down his pants.

“How fast are you at running?” His voice is almost conversational, but the glint in his eyes makes me believe that his madness has grown from an ember to a blistering inferno.

“Huh?”

Leaning closer, so his breath feathers my ear, he whispers, “Run.”

With a whoop, Akor takes off towards the entrance of the store, grabbing items at random and shoving them down his shirt and pants. For a moment, I stare after him in abject disbelief. An alarm begins to blare when he passes the metal detectors at the store’s entrance.

“Hey!” Mindy screeches, dropping the dress Akor assigned her to grab.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I curse, volleying my gaze between a furious Mindy and a grinning Akor. Before I can think the better of it, I take off in a run after the wicked demon, ignoring Mindy’s screams.

Mall patrons give us a wide berth as we skate around them, dashing in the direction of the mall’s entrance.

“What the hell are we doing?” I bellow at Akor, who grabs an iPhone case off the nearest mall stand. The clerk—a ruddy-faced man with a protruding belly—begins yelling in a foreign language at a hysterically laughing Akor.

“We’re being *naughty*.” His eyebrows waggle suggestively at that word as he jumps over one of the tables in front of a smoothie stall. If I tried that, I’d break my neck, so instead, I bolt around the table.

I can hear footsteps rapidly approaching from behind us, but I don’t dare turn around. My heart hammers in my chest, and I’m afraid that any second, it’ll escape and splatter across the floor.

“Mall security!” a man yells. “Stop right there!”

Despite his very authoritative tone, we don’t stop.

“Isn’t it fun to go shopping with me?” Akor cackles as we skirt around a children’s playset.

I literally don’t have the breath to respond.

“Usually, Zolroth insists on buying us clothes. Apparently, we don’t know how to dress. But you wouldn’t want to be with the stuffy old Brit, would you? I heard he has a ten-inch...” He turns to stare at me over his shoulder, still racing towards the exit. “Accent.”

A ten-inch...? You know what? I'm not even going to attempt to analyze Akor's crazy.

I can see the wide doors in front of us, and my steps quicken. Akor continues to laugh raucously, keeping pace with me, despite the fact that I know he could easily outrun me.

Maybe it's fucked up, but I can't help but feel...exhilarated. A strange kind of giddiness fills my limbs. I'm running from mall security with thousands of dollars of stolen merchandise, and I have a big-ass smile on my face like some sort of psychopath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Akor smiling just as widely, as alive by the thrill as I am. And this golden connection seems to shimmer in the air between us, like our souls are merging or some poetic weird shit—

Oh God. Am I the female version of Akor? Please, please no.

Pain erupts through my nose as I run straight into a brick wall.

No, not a brick wall—a terrifying security agent standing directly in front of me.

Three more surround Akor, who is still laughing like a freaking hyena.

“Come with me, miss,” the glowering man says, roughly grabbing my arm and yanking me forward.

Oh, fuck.



WE ARE frog-marched across the mall, our hands held behind our backs by a couple of burly security guards while the fattest one walks ahead of us, swinging his brightly-colored food court lemonade cup side to side to clear the way.

“Back! Get back!” he grunts, as if shoppers have any interest in stopping them.

Meanwhile, the insane thrill I felt is turtling. Sometimes, like when Akor makes eye contact with me, it pops back out. And other times, like when the lady at the frozen yogurt stand shakes her head at me in silent judgement, it hides deep inside.

What the hell was I thinking?

I wasn’t, that much is clear. Shit.

Akor loses several of the rings as we walk, and the indignant shop girl scurries behind us, scooping them up and hurling insults our way. “Stupid fucking thieves. You think you’re fucking smart? You stupid shits.”

She doesn’t have very creative insults. Maybe this is the first time she’s been robbed?

I realize I’ve said that aloud when Akor chuckles, but the next time she scoops up a ring that’s slid out of his pants, she mutters, “I don’t need

more creative insults for you, tramp. When your face looks like *that*, your existence itself *is* an insult.”

Suddenly, she arches her back and screams, “Oh, Holy Lucifer!” as if she’s been set on fire.

Everyone freezes, and we stop to turn and stare. But just as quickly as she started writhing, she stops. She pulls herself off the floor, wipes down the spittle that’s covering her face, gives us a nasty look, and stomps back to her store.

Once she’s gone, Akor shakes his pants, letting the remaining rings fall out and roll across the floor. The chubby security guard waddles around picking them up as the other two make us continue our walk of shame through the mall.

Two exercising grandmothers in tracksuits shake their heads as they pass us. “Matching pink-haired hooligans,” one mutters.

And I look over and realize that the dyed portion of Akor’s hair does look a little bit similar to mine. For some strange reason, that brings a smile to my face.

But that smile is quickly ripped away when we’re shoved roughly into the tiny, windowless cube that houses mall security. There’s a desk with a bunch of security cameras with black and white screens piled on top of it. The whole place smells of urine, and my nose crinkles.

I look to my right, and the smell makes a lot more sense. There’s an entire row of yellow plastic chairs for lost kids, and one of them is occupied by a sniffing little girl.

My heart melts. She looks like she’s Adam’s age, and sympathy surges through me.

Giving her a soft smile, I whisper, “Hey, I’m sure your mom will be here soon.”

“Quiet!” barks the guy with the lemonade, sloshing it authoritatively in my direction.

I shut up and let them lead Akor and me over to a set of folding chairs near the back of the cramped space. The chubby guard tells us to sit down and then turns his back on us, revealing a horribly hairy plumber's crack as his pants slip.

Akor's fingers slide over mine, and he gives my hand a tiny squeeze.

That squeeze travels up my arm like a lightning bolt, and suddenly, I feel energized and giddy...and even a little horny. Not like demon horns-on-head but like...the other kind. The kind that heats up your inner thighs like the flames of Hell are licking them, slowly stoking naughty fire inside of me.

My eyes widen as I stare up at Akor, and I see him staring right back at me, the same surprised but intense expression on his face.

Are we bonding over shared buttcrack trauma?

One of the rent-a-cops takes the little girl by the hand, saying, "Let's stand outside and see if we can find your mom, okay, sweetheart?"

As soon as the girl is outside, one of the security guys turns to us and exclaims, "Gonna need your ID. And if you give me any lip, I'll just say you resisted."

"Sure." Akor leans forward, flicks his fingers, and an ID appears in his hand out of thin air.

The guard chuckles. "We got a Houdini on our hands."

I see Akor bristle, and I worry he's about to repeat the episode with the shop girl, making this burly security guard drop to the ground and flail around. Because, yeah, I believe he did that. I reach out and brush my hand over his. "Hey," I whisper softly, drawing his gaze to me.

The blaze of fury in his eyes softens when he sees my face. His expression... Gah! If only William looked at me that way!

I bite my lip softly.

"Yes, beautiful?" he asks, his voice taking on a husky tone.

“Thank you for the adventure,” I tell him.

His resulting grin is as warm as sunshine.

“But I think I need to stop now. I don’t want to do anything that might get me taken away from Adam,” I tell him, trying to be gentle but get my point across.

Akor huffs out a long-suffering, overdramatic sigh. “Fine. Fine. I’ll play nice.”

I reach into my skirt and pull out my phone, which has my ID rubber-banded to it. I hand the ID over to the grumpy security officer, then sit back in my seat, awaiting my fate. But Akor can’t sit patiently. It’s not in him.

As soon as the guards are occupied, he starts a game of footsie with me, which progresses until we’re all out giggling and kicking one another from our seats.

When my parents walk in, I’m mid-kick. They both sweep in, wearing their dark-colored power suits, carrying briefcases like this is some meeting. They haven’t had to come in to pick me up for anything since the time I got tonsillitis in seventh grade. I’ve never even gotten detention. So the look on their faces, and the mere fact that they are both here, is immensely and nauseatingly uncomfortable.

Part of me smiles inside to see their confused expressions. The immature, teenage asshole part, I’m sure, but still. They have no frickin’ idea how many times I’ve had to walk into uncomfortable situations because of them. Hello, switching Adam’s daycare because the old place sucked but they couldn’t be bothered?

I bite down on my grin and try to stay quiet as my dad speaks to the security guards.

“The store wants to press charges—”

Akor leans forward in his seat, raising a hand like we’re in class. “Excuse me, but we didn’t actually steal anything.”

That makes conversation halt.

My parents both turn to stare at Akor. They eye him up and down, and my mother's wine-colored, perfectly applied lipstick arches into a frown. It's very clear she does not approve.

Something inside of me rebels at that. Who the hell is she to judge him? He was there for me when I was upset...which is more than they could ever say about themselves.

Akor slides his hand onto my knee and gently rubs a circle on it with his thumb. It's actually really fucking sweet, until he says, "Aren't you going to defend your daughter from these assholes?"

That really riles my parents up.

My mom marches over and grabs my arm, yanking me to my feet and then tugging me away from Akor. "Our daughter pleads the fifth. You can send any charges and evidence here," she shoves a business card at the security guard. "But know that I'm going to request all footage of this mall for the past two years, and if I find any single thing to impugn your characters, I'll get it splashed all over the nightly news so you can never work again."

Damn. I'm slightly impressed by how growly and badass she looks at this moment.

Akor leaps up on his chair and claps.

Mom does not appreciate that. Her hand clamps down on my arm, and she shoves me toward the door. My father follows, silent but pulsing with fury.

I turn to glance back at Akor, but Dad growls, "Face forward, young lady."

"I can't even believe this," Mom mutters as she drags me to the nearest exit, which turns out to be really far from where they've parked. But they'd rather have me out in the parking lot, where they can berate me at will without dozens of witnesses.

And they lay it on as thick as peanut butter as soon as we get outside. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth as they shove guilt trips and shame down my throat.

Mom clicks open her Beemer as she snarls, “I have never been so humiliated.”

Dad shakes his head as he tosses his briefcase in his own trunk (they always drive separately in case they have to deal with work emergencies). “I forbid you from seeing that boy again. He’s clearly a bad influence.”

Mom looks at Dad, her gaze pinched. She fiddles with one of her conservative, looks-like-jizz-stuck-on-her-ear pearl earrings. “Should I get her drug tested? She has to be high.”

Dad shakes his head. “Don’t want the evidence from that to creep up sometime.”

“I know but...treatment?” she asks. They talk across the roof of the car, staring at one another as if I’m not fucking here.

“I’m not on anything!” I scream.

Mom jumps.

Dad just does the disappointed head shake thing at me again.

“Ever think, that maybe...instead of drugs, I just lack parental guidance? Hmm? Could that be it? Could this be your fucking fault?” I cross my arms and stare between them.

“Don’t be facetious, Katrina.” Mom rolls her eyes at me and turns back to Dad. “I’ll drop her at home since you have that deposition.”

“Give her a chore list. She can weed the damn garden and mow the lawn. I’ll call Green Space and cancel,” Dad growls before his dark eyes land on me. “You want us involved? Guess what? You’ll get nothing but that from now on. I’m going to take over your schedule. Sound fun?”

I’ve always wanted to be on my parents’ radar before. But not like this. As I climb into the back of Mom’s car, phrases like “grounded” and “take-away-your phone” swirl through the air.

At one point during the drive home, my mom even explodes, “This whole thing could ruin your chances at college!”

From the way she's ranting, I'm going to be locked in my room for the next few months. And from what Dad said, it sounds like I'll be spending my time scrubbing toilets and trimming bushes. All because of one afternoon of immature fun. Regret starts to tarnish the enjoyment of my afternoon. The happy bubbles in my belly that Akor's grin conjured up pop and leave me feeling deflated and empty.

I turn and stare out the window at the suburban landscape as it blurs. The same house and the same house and the same house. My future as a Stepford lawyer, spending sunup to sundown in some law firm with the blinds pulled shut, coming home to my cookie cutter house and popping out babies because it's just what you do. My future as a carbon copy of my shit parents.

I hate that fucking vision.

I turn away from the window and fight the tears that fill my eyes.

I shouldn't have done what I did today—I know that. I'm not an idiot. But...it was different. It was impulsive. It was...actually fun.

But shame on me for thinking a demon could cheer me up and show me a good time. Akor and the guys have been nothing but trouble since they showed up.

I'm not this wild girl. I'm not this irresponsible teenager. I'm the definition of a bland, responsible nerd.

Akor and the guys are fucking with me. That's what demons do, right? They aren't really here to help me. I'm an idiot for thinking they could have been. They're probably here to torture me. Drive me crazy. Ruin me.

I need to avoid them at all costs. Before they make my *entire* life a living hell.



SOMETHING'S different the very next day, when my stern-faced mom drops me off at school.

Apparently, one of their prerogatives of being better parents is taking away my car. They don't seem to understand that without it, they'll be forced to take me *and* Adam to and from school every damn day. And take us to appointments. And drive us to the grocery store when they forget to pick up supplies. And bring me to my decathlon tournaments on the weekends.

I'll give it a few days. They'll forget about me soon enough, and life will go back to normal.

Well, as normal as it can be with five demons stalking my every move.

The eyes fixated on me are unnerving as I move through the throng of students towards my first hour class. The hushed murmurs of the other students reach my ears, but no matter how much I strain, I can't make out what they're saying.

Unease skates down my spine as I quicken my pace, casting inconspicuous glances over my shoulder. A group of girls point to me and break into giggles before turning away. I'm so preoccupied with their reaction towards boring old me that I don't notice the man until I'm practically eating his chest.

"Woah." Strong hands rest on my shoulders, lingering a second longer than propriety would allow. "Katrina, right?"

I turn towards the newcomer with barely veiled confusion. Jason Brett stands before me, a smug smirk tugging up the corners of his thin lips. He's a running back on the football team and one of the guys that *every* girl wants to get with. Even I can admit that he's handsome in a boy-next-door kind of way. He smiles ruefully at me as his forest green gaze travels over my body.

"Umm...yeah?"

Does he need to borrow my notes? I'm pretty sure he has AP Chemistry later in the day. Honestly, I can't tell you for sure. I'm a little preoccupied with William and his cute dimples and sexy, broad shoulders and...

And I'm honestly offended he needed a reminder of my name. We've been classmates forever, and he talked to me just a few days prior, at the Halloween party.

Boys, am I right?

Jason surprises the ever-loving shit out of me when he leans forward and twirls a strand of my pink hair around his finger. I'm too stunned to do anything but gape at him like an imbecile.

Jason Brett is touching me.

Jason. Brett. Is. Touching. Me.

Has Hell frozen over?

I don't know how and I don't know why, but I *know* the demons are behind this.

The group of girls I noted earlier are glaring at me with open hostility and jealousy. The ringleader, a girl I recognize as Molly something, whispers to her bleached-blond friend. Both of them titter, still glancing at me. The third girl, whose name I can't recall, merely stares at me with wide-eyed awe and wonderment.

What the fuck is going on?

"I heard about what happened at the mall." Jason lazily—almost lackadaisically—twirls my hair before tucking it behind my ear. "That's

pretty badass.”

Pretty badass?

Thing at the mall?

Oh...fuck.

“I was thinking that we could maybe hang out sometime,” he continues, oblivious to the girls hurling daggers in our direction. Suddenly, the appreciative gleam in the eyes of the other guys standing around him makes ten times more sense.

They think I’m some sort of...badass criminal or something.

I’m really just an *or something*. I’m much more comfortable being an *or something* than being spoken to by some hunky jocks.

“I...um...” Floundering, I attempt to conjure up an excuse as to why we should never, *ever* hang out. I’m pretty sure declaring that I’m in love with another boy won’t appease him.

“Kat!” a honey-toned voice breaks in from behind me. A moment later, a heavy arm drapes itself over my shoulders and nestles me against a toned body. Instantly, my body droops in noticeable relief before I quickly catch myself and steel my expression.

I should *not* feel comforted by the sexy, British demon. Not at all.

Zolroth smiles easily, blinding me with his pearly white teeth that offset his dark brown skin. The top few buttons of his uniform shirt are undone, revealing a chiseled, smooth chest. His golden-brown eyes flicker in the artificial lighting as he presses me further against his body, ignoring my huff of indignation.

“Baby...” he purrs in that delicious, mouth-watering, fucking *erotic* accent of his. He lowers his face to the crook of my neck and runs his nose up and down. Goosebumps immediately ripple on my skin as his hot breath curls around me. “Who is this?”

Jason’s eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. He eyes Zolroth like a fighter assessing an opponent.

“Who the fuck are you?” he demands at last, crossing his arms over his chest. He hefts his chin up in what I think is supposed to be an intimidating gesture. The fact that he’s a few inches shorter than Zolroth and significantly lankier isn’t lost on anyone.

“Zolroth,” the charming—did I say charming? I meant disgusting—demon responds, extending a hand. “And I’m just here to walk my girl to our first class.”

His girl?

His girl?!

My panties and my brain simultaneously combust. One in a good way. The other...not.

Jason glares at Zolroth a second more, sizing him up before eventually conceding with a scowl. To me, he says, “I’ll talk to you later.”

As the footballer stalks away, muttering incoherent curse words beneath his breath, I whirl on Zolroth.

“What the fuck was that all about?” I’m keenly aware that the gaggle of girls I noted earlier have inched a few steps closer, almost as if they’re attempting to eavesdrop on our conversation. Actually, there’s no “almost” about it. Molly is virtually doing the splits in an attempt to get closer and listen in. And I can see frickin’ Janie St. James practically sprinting down the hall so she can catch up on this gossip.

Zolroth maintains his stupidly perfect and pretty smile, grabbing my arm gently and dragging me towards a...janitor’s closet.

Yup.

I can already hear the rumors.

“You son of a donkey’s anus!” I hiss when we’re inside and he finally releases me. Immediately, I rub at my skin, despite the fact his touch caused no pain. If anything, licks of fire dance just beneath the surface, surging through my veins.

“I’ve never heard a girl swear as much as you,” he muses, tapping one of his dark, elegant fingers against his chin in contemplation. Piano hands. And...now is not the time to think of those fingers gliding across the keys and other, more sensitive areas. His next words, however, smother that illusion. “It’s so...uncouth.”

Rage blinds me as I glare up at the condescending, smug asshole. “Okay, listen up. I know that I accidentally summoned you or whatever, but you guys need to leave me the hell alone. You’re fucking with my *life*.”

Those dark, golden-tinted eyes of his twinkle slightly.

“We had a deal, princess, and we’re not allowed to leave until we fulfill our end. William Washington *has* to fall in love with you.”

“And I can do that without your help!” I seethe, balling my hands into fists. I suppose a small, minuscule part of me is upset that none of these demons seem to believe I’m capable of getting William’s love without their help.

Am I really that dull of a person that I have to change myself so completely? Do I have to become unrecognizable? Will William ever just like me for me?

Stop it with the depressive thoughts, Katrina. Grow a pair of ovaries and destroy this asshole.

“I got you a present.” Zolroth’s abrupt change in topic gives me whiplash as he fiddles with something in his jacket pocket before removing it. A fuzzy black box sits snugly in his hand, and when he opens it, I see an admittedly gorgeous silver charm bracelet. Only one charm dangles from the end—a luminescent K that glitters in the dim lighting of the closet.

“What the fuck?” I eye the bracelet as if it’s coated with poison. “Did you steal it?”

Zolroth looks affronted, his lips compressed in a grim line. He scoffs indignantly as he grabs my wrist and clasps the bracelet onto my unmoving, limp limb.

“Of course not. Unlike the other imbeciles, I invest in stocks whenever I travel to the earthen realm. After a century or so, you’re able to procure a small fortune.” He smiles disarmingly, as if his words didn’t send my head in a tailspin. Fortune? Centuries? They’d told me they were old...but that was when I thought everything was an elaborate prank.

“Why are you doing this?” I breathe, staring intently at the bracelet. It really is beautiful, in a hypnotizing way.

“It’s simple.” His finger lightly, almost teasingly, traces the vein on my wrist. Goosebumps pebble on my arm at the menial contact. “Your William is a jealous fellow. If he thinks that you’re taken...” He shrugs his broad shoulders nonchalantly.

A part of me is annoyed, but a larger part is...hurt. Hurt that all of his kind words are nothing but a ploy to make William Washington jealous.

I immediately dismiss the notion that I should be hurt by that. I don’t know Zolroth or any of these demons, and they don’t know me. We’re both using each other to get what we want. Zolroth doesn’t care about me any more than I care about him or any of his “friends.”

So why is he giving me the bracelet in private, away from gossiping eyes?

“I don’t need your help,” I repeat, shoving past him to open the closet door. “I’m more than capable of finding a boyfriend on my own, thank you very much.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I push the door open and storm into the hallway. I can hear Zolroth directly behind me, so close that his breath caresses the hairs on my neck.

Stupid demons. Stupid, asshole demons. Stupid, asshole, sexy demons. Stupid—

I pause my internal rant when I see William standing at the end of the hallway. Most of the students have already left, eager to beat the warning bell, but not my William. He’s way too cocky to allow something like a school bell to dictate where he goes and when.

His eyes are comically wide as he glances between me and Zolroth and then the closet behind us. His face darkens drastically, and I can almost hear the wheels churning in his head as he pieces together a conclusion—the wrong one.

Without a word to either of us, he stomps in the opposite direction, his hands bunched into fists. I watch him go with my heart lodged in my throat, wishing I could, I dunno, call out to him. It almost appeared as if he was jealous. Which is impossible, right? A guy would have to like a girl to be jealous.

And I would definitely know if William liked me.

Zolroth flashes me a cocky grin.

“See?” he says smugly, and I resist the urge to punch him in his perfect teeth.

“You’re an insufferable asshole,” I huff.

“That may be, but this insufferable asshole will get you what your heart desires.” He moves to stand beside me, and despite the hallways being empty of students, wraps an arm around my shoulders, tugging me into his chest. “Even if what your heart desires is a prep-school, wannabe Disney prince with a horrible haircut and a dick the size of my pinkie. But to each their own.”



BY THE TIME I get to academic decathlon club after school, my safe haven, I feel like I've been transported into a parallel universe.

This day was even crazier than yesterday, and I almost got arrested yesterday.

Janie St. James and her crew tried to sit by me at lunch. I've been invited to a barbecue and a party downtown at someone's uncle's condo. I don't know where, but I've been assured there will be coke. As in *cocaine*!

What the hell is going on?

Did these people *not* see my mommy drop me off this morning? Do they not know that my life regularly consists of burning spaghetti as I cook dinner and simultaneously try to play Transformer Killer Robots vs. Godzilla with Adam?

I'm not cool enough for cocaine parties.

But Zolroth already winked and agreed we'd go.

And I don't even want to think about P.E. and how asshole Mr. D made me dance with every guy *but* William. Or how I bolted past the counselor's office when Van stepped out and mentioned I had an appointment to the entire hallway. Which I did not!

Of course, when I'd run, fucking Mr. D had popped up out of nowhere and taken it upon himself to catch me and bodily drag me back. And I mean bodily. His hard chest had pressed against mine, and he'd slid me down the front of him like I was a stripper and he was the pole.

The session with Van had made me sweat like I was in a sauna. He'd asked me all kinds of questions about my preferences, telling me he wanted to make sure William and I were compatible.

"What's your favorite meal?" Van had sat back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head as he quizzed me about my dating favorites.

I'd just made shit up. I don't have dating favorites because, newsflash, I don't date.

But I'd spat out answers like I was a sprinkler on automatic swivel.

"Italian food."

"Orange sherbet."

"Walks in the park."

Until he'd asked about oral sex preferences.

Then I'd run a second time.

If Mr. D had been waiting, I would have kicked him in the sac to get away.

That's how bad today was. And that's how much I want to use this club, this final forty-five minutes before my mom picks me up, to escape it all. I want to memorize how many Huns Atila had and how many wives Henry the Eighth boinked and lose myself in stupid crazy facts that have nothing to do with my life.

I just want to forget this fucking insanity and then go home and cuddle Adam. I wanna nuke some mac and cheese in the micro and open up the entire carton of vanilla ice cream and *go to town* for dinner, just like we do on what Adam calls "fattie days" and I call my goddamned period.

It's a period kind of day. Bloody bad—to be British about it.

But British reminds me of Zolroth, which reminds me of the guys.

Fuck.

I can't even curse the day without thinking of them.

I march right to my normal chair, nodding to a couple of the guys on the team (yes, it's mostly guys whose testicles seem to have yet to drop). I sink into my seat and stare across the classroom.

And then I nearly start to cry.

Because I see who's sitting in the teacher's seat. It's not Mr. Penn, the anorexic-looking teacher with the mail order bride from Thailand who has won my heart over the past three years with his lame dad jokes.

Nope.

No Mr. Penn.

It's demon number five.

Kastros.

The hulking, brooding man sits behind the desk, his dark eyelashes framing eyes that look like they want to bore holes in my face. His cut jaw has a five o'clock shadow. And he's not fooling anyone with that skinny black tie. He's no nerd. His body is the epitome of meathead. He could give most bodybuilders a run for their money.

My team captain, Alanna, the only other girl on the team, approaches me with a huge smile. I notice she's taken out her Invisalign retainers today. Guess she's decided that the new teacher doesn't need to accidentally get sprayed with spit every third word.

Wish she'd shown that kind of consideration to me last year when we'd gone to state and had to sit together constantly.

But I digress.

Alanna is all smiles as she introduces me, paying zero attention to the fact that she stands on my bad side and I can't fucking hear her.

I have to turn my body in my seat to face her so I can figure out what she's saying.

“Katrina, this is Mr. Kastros.” Then, like she’s some excited parakeet, she flaps her hands in front of her chest. “Mr. Kastros is deaf. Luckily, I have a cousin who’s deaf so I know sign language.”

From the back of the room, Wade, a guy whose mouth and asshole got swapped at birth, yells, “What the hell, dude? How the fuck is a deaf guy gonna teach us?”

Faster than I can blink, Kastros throws a textbook across the room, and it smacks Wade in the nose. He howls in pain as it starts bleeding.

The rest of the room goes as silent as a graveyard.

I swap a scared look with Tim, a Korean guy who’s been my decathlon study buddy for years.

Right, then.

Don’t insult the demon. Got it.

Though I am kinda ticked he’s pretending to be deaf. He can hear. And he has no fucking clue how much it sucks to have to constantly ask people to repeat things. Sometimes, I swear they look at me like I’m an idiot. Which I’m not. I took first place last year at state in the speech competition. People are just so self-absorbed, they can’t remember to talk to my good ear. Like Alanna.

Kastros stands, and with one last glare at me, as though I did something, he turns to the board and starts to write. *I can read lips. You practice together. You compete. I watch. You fuck off, and there will be consequences.*

Great. So he’s just gonna sit there?

Can he promise?

Can I get it in writing?

It’s better than the other demons, I suppose. If he keeps to his word. And stops throwing books at people. I’ll make an exception this time because Wade is Wade. “So Alanna will be in charge? And you’re not going to interfere?”

The question is out of my mouth before I can think the better of it.

Kastros nods, and I feel something tighten in my chest. It's almost like I'm disappointed he's not going to be more involved...which is crazy, because I'm not disappointed.

I want this promise. I like it.

But are demons known for keeping their promises?

That thought throws me for a second.

It's not until Alanna yanks on my jacket and looks at me with wide, panicked eyes that I realize I spoke aloud.

I just called Kastros a demon in front of the other students.

Crap. Maybe I need to have my tongue removed like his.

My gaze flicks back to the desk, and I'm not thrilled to realize that there's still a book on top of it.

I look up at Kastros, whose eyes growl at me.

But he doesn't reach for the book. Instead, he lets the tension and anticipation build, which is almost worse.

Shit.

I glance around and see Tim and his friend, Darrel, staring at me.

Well fuck.

My normal reaction would be to book it and run and then just never show my face here again. But I think yesterday's hijinks might have loosened a screw in my head or something, because I walk forward, through tension as thick as tar, until I stand right by Kastros's desk.

Our eyes are locked together, and everyone else in the room seems to fade away. I only see him.

Breathless, I reach down and slide my fingers across the textbook lying open in front of him. I gently shut it. Then I pick it up while Kastros

watches. His eyes trail up me like vines and wrap around my wrists.

I gently bonk the side of my head with the book. “There. Justice served.”

There’s an audible gasp from the rest of the class as they wait to see how Kastros will react.

He’s slow and deliberate when he picks up a pen and pulls out a sheet of paper from the top drawer of the desk. His script is elegant and old-fashioned when he writes, *I am vengeance. Not justice. You can only serve vengeance on your knees.* He underlines the last three words.

As if he’s commanded them to, my knees start to tremble. When he hands me the note and his fingers brush mine, electricity shoots through me.

I feel as though I’m half a second from death. And as terrified as I am, I’m also a little, tiny bit thrilled.

I fold the note in half and slowly back away. I return to my seat with my throat still tight.

Everyone is dead silent and still, like rabbits watching a predator, hoping it won’t see them. When Kastros stands, every eye is on him. When he turns to the board, startled glances are exchanged. When he writes, *Get to work*, there’s a mad scramble for notecards.

As I tuck his note into my bag, I see it one last time. And it’s only then that I realize that “on your knees” might have a different meaning than I originally thought. It might not mean at the tip of a sword—I mean a sword-sword, a real sword, not a...never mind.

My eyes fly up to Kastros, wondering if my brain’s just in some fevered, near-death state of horniness—is that even a thing?—but just then, Janie St. James and the bimbo crew walk in the door.

Janie leans across the teacher’s desk, her shirt in clear violation of the dress code. She’s not wearing an undershirt, and she has one too many buttons undone on her uniform blouse. I swear I can see her nips from here.

“Hi! Are we late for decathlon?” she asks in a simpering tone. “We all want to join.”

And somehow, despite everything that just fucking happened, my day gets even worse.



I PAIR UP WITH TIM AND WADE WHILE JANIE AND THE OTHERS FAN OUT around Kastros’s desk. His grumpy expression doesn’t change, but something about all of that doesn’t sit right with me.

Those girls don’t give a shit about decathlon. They shouldn’t be here. “They’re going to ruin our chances at state,” I mutter.

Tim and Wade are as distracted by the view as I am, though I’m pretty sure they’re focused on Janie’s short skirt and not Mr. Kastros’s buff forearms as he rolls up his shirt sleeves.

He starts writing notes for each of the new girls, four in total, and I just about burn to death with curiosity over what he’s written. Does it have any double entendres like my note?

For some reason, I hate the thought of that.

Probably because Akor has somehow turned me into a psychopath, I think as I shuffle my notecards about Africa.

Wade looks at me and smiles, revealing his dimple underneath some thick red acne. “You ready for this? Because I don’t think you can handle this!” He starts singing the old Beyoncé song and dancing in his seat.

He’s awfully fucking chipper. Maybe the book to the head did him good. Or maybe the bimbos in the room are making him light-headed. Either way, Wade’s not being his normal level of douche-nozzle.

Small blessings, right?

I force a smile and start to quiz Wade. “Until 1960, Congo was under the control of what country?”

Wade scoffs, leaning back in his seat, his feet sliding toward mine, prepping for our foot-mashing tradition—if you get an answer wrong, we have a rather childish yet effective method of toe stomping to make you study your ass off. “Belgium. Try harder next time, Kat.”

I blow out a breath. It was too easy a question. For all his asshole ways, Wade’s got the brain of a sea sponge—he soaks up information. I should have dug through my cards. But the way Janie’s leaning over Mr. Kastros’s desk has me distracted.

I turn in my desk so I’m not facing them. I have to focus. Wade does not show mercy. He flips through the notecards he’s made of questions, trying to ferret out something to exploit my weaknesses.

“What nineteenth century realist artist outraged conventional audiences by portraying the working class?”

Fuck. Art is my weakness, and Wade knows it. We have to study these pictures of famous paintings and try to remember who did what. But visual things have never been my forte. I chew my lip. “Options?” I finally, grudgingly, have to ask for multiple choice.

Wade lists off four artists, and I immediately rule out two. It’s a fifty-fifty shot after that. I glance at Tim to see if my study buddy will give me any hints, but he’s too busy checking out Molly—one of our new “members”—to be of any help.

“Gustave Courbet?” I guess.

Wade stomps on my foot.

Dammit.

“Correct!” he says.

“What the hell!” I kick him. “I got it right.”

He kicks me back, his foot sliding up my inner calf. “But you guessed.”

“So?” I knock his foot away with my hand and then flick my leg so I kick his instep.

“So, we aren’t going to win with guesses.” Wade leans over his desk, making me shrink back. He uses the opportunity to trap my foot between both of his.

What the hell is his problem? I try to get my foot away, but he won’t let go.

“Um, guys?” Tim tries to warn us to stop.

But it’s a full-on fucking foot battle now. Wade’s pissed at me. I’m pissed at him. Our feet start trading blows.

Of course, Molly notices. “What the hell, Kat! I thought you were with Roth! Why are you playing footsie with Wade?”

Every eye in the room turns to stare.

This is kind of becoming a thing—people staring at me.

A book flies through the air, narrowly missing my head, cutting off the footsie feud. But as my eyes meet Kastros’s furious gaze, I’m pretty sure I’m in way more trouble than anyone else in the room even realizes.

Because the vengeance demon already gave me one pass. What are the odds he’ll give me another?



I'M PRETTY SURE my street-cred nosedives down the toilet like a massive shit when Mother Dearest arrives to pick me up in her sleek convertible, the top down as if she's attempting to be "hip" and "cool" and "one with the kids."

Her brown hair blows around her face as she narrows her pinprick blue eyes at me. As always, she's outfitted in an immaculate black pantsuit that makes her appear even colder and icier than I thought possible.

She doesn't bother to ask me how school was as I slide into the leather passenger seat, cheeks burning with shame at the curious stares from the other students. Thank fuck William's still at rowing practice. I think my soul would physically be wrenched from my body like some sort of fucked up wedgie if he was witness to this.

Don't get me wrong. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having your parents pick you up from school. The majority of my classmates, especially the younger ones, do this all the time.

But my mom? She's a well-known figure in our community. And a hated one, at that. She defended a serial rapist who targeted high school girls (several in my class). She told me that the money was too good to pass up. He was acquitted of all charges, and she officially became known in the social circles as a ruthless and vicious bitch. A real-life shark that circles the water, hunting for blood.

I could hardly eat for a week when I found out she was on that case—from the news, not her. Because she doesn't tell me anything, of course. But every time I looked at my plate, all I could think about was, *a bad man paid for this*.

We're silent the entire ride back to the house, and she still doesn't acknowledge me when I grab my backpack from where I threw it in the backseat and stalk inside.

"Katty!" Adam's tiny voice precedes the munchkin himself barreling me over, and his arms wrap around my waist in an iron vise.

"Hey, kiddo." I ruffle his dark hair as he begins to incessantly babble about his day at preschool.

"Your father and I are heading out tonight," Mom interrupts in her nasally voice. Her chin is tilted upwards as if there's a particularly pungent smell perfuming the kitchen. "I trust that you'll be able to handle things, Katrina."

I barely, just fucking barely, tamp down on the irritation that threatens to bubble over like water hissing in a kettle. My hands clench into fists as I take a deep, fortifying breath.

"Yes, Mother," I reply with all the pleasantries of a prisoner facing her execution.

"Part of being an adult is having responsibility," she continues on, trailing her manicured fingers across the granite countertop. She pulls them away as if inspecting her fingers for dust. "Can you handle this responsibility, Kat? All you have to do is cook dinner and put Adam to bed at nine."

At eight, I mentally correct her. What type of parent doesn't know her own son's bedtime?

And who the fuck does she think she is?

I've been taking care of Adam for *years* now. I grew up in a span of days so he didn't have to. That's all I ever wanted for my baby brother—the chance for him to enjoy his childhood. Why tarnish his innocence when he has someone like me to protect him?

I try my hardest not to allow anger to consume me. It feels like thick vines are erupting from the ground and coiling around my neck, cutting off my circulation. I struggle against the oppressive weight, my fingernails tugging at the plant, but it's futile. I can never break free of it.

Having said her piece, Mom strides out of the kitchen, her high heels clicking against the tiles. The floor has been polished so meticulously, I can see my reflection in it. Honestly, I have no idea if my parents hire a maid to come in during the day while I'm at school and clean this entire house. It wouldn't surprise me, especially because my parents *hate* cleaning with a passion.

It's another chore. Just like me.

"It's just going to be you and me tonight," I whisper to Adam, reaching down to interlock our fingers. I can't quite dispel the sudden lump that forms in my throat. I shouldn't be disappointed or even surprised by my mother's behavior. Honestly, I'm not sure if she has ever cared about me or my brother. Maybe she cared, at one point, but that emotion has diminished with time, distorting it into a form of tolerance mixed with hatred.

Adam squeezes my hand back and turns towards me, his eyes indecipherable but emanating a wisdom that goes beyond his four years. "It's always been just you and me."

And that, more than anything, sums up my entire life.



I MAKE ADAM'S FAVORITE—SPAGHETTI AND MEATBALLS—BEFORE PUTTING on a recorded episode of *Paw Patrol* to get through the night. While he watches his show, I finish my homework and then take an hour to study the flashcards Tim made me. I'll never be as smart as, say, Wade, but I'm determined to do better than Janie and the rest of her minions. This team is *mine*, and I'll be damned if I let her take it from me because of a sexy, infuriating, sexy—

Wait, where am I going with that?

Shaking my head, I turn slightly towards Adam, who is sprawled across the couch. His chest rises and falls with his steady, even breathing, and love for him blossoms in my chest.

Smiling softly, I climb out of the armchair, taking a moment to stretch out my taut muscles before bending down to scoop Adam up. There's going to be a point when he becomes too heavy for me to do this, but for now, I'll savor these precious moments. His head lolls on my shoulder as his tiny hands fist in my shirt.

"Katty?" he whispers drowsily, voice muffled from where his face is flush against my neck.

"Time for bed, Adam."

After having him brush his teeth and change into pajamas, I tuck him in. He's out before I can even cover him with the quilt, and I take a moment to stare at his sleepy, angelic face. How long until my parents smother his innocence like they did mine? How much longer can I protect him from that, from them? I vow to myself, right then and there, that I'll be his sword and his shield for however long he lets me. Planting a tender kiss on his forehead, I make sure that his nightlight is still on before creeping out of the room on silent feet.

I still have a dozen or so more study cards to get through. And I wanted to get started on the upcoming English paper. And I need to—

An eardrum-rupturing crash reverberates from the kitchen. My muscles lock together as I freeze on the stairs, one hand gripping the rail as fear pounds through me. I can hear my heart roaring in my chest, drowning out my thoughts, as I remain rooted in place. I'm not even sure I'm breathing.

And then...

"Turtle dove!" Akor appears around the corner, his vibrant pink mohawk belying the wicked, mischievous glint in his eyes. "You're here!"

I hurry down the rest of the stairs, one finger already on my lips as I shush him.

“Adam is sleeping,” I hiss, glancing over his shoulder where all of the other demons are lounging around my living room.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck—

“What are you doing here?” I continue, interrupting my internal rant. I’m not gonna lie, mixed in with the annoyance at seeing them is a heavy dose of fear too. Both emotions circle and hiss at one another like a nest of slithering snakes that reside in my stomach.

They’re in my house.

Alone.

With Adam.

Again.

Icy dread skates down my spine as I force myself to meet Akor’s stare with a defiant one of my own. I was fine when we were at school and they were attempting to take over my life. That’s different—I’m the only person they’re bothering. But to come to my house? Again? That familiar fear I felt when I first met them returns with a vengeance. Because they’re still demons, still bad guys, and try as I might, it’s impossible for me to forget. The last thing I want is to get Adam involved in their...crazy.

Akor’s lips twitch as if he’s privy to my inner thoughts. Which is ridiculous, obviously. Demons can’t read minds, can they? Definitely not. Right?

Someone please say I’m right, for my own mental sanity.

“We’re going to party!” Akor throws his head back and rips down the middle of his shirt. I immediately tear my gaze away from his lean, muscular chest covered in hundreds of intricate tattoos.

“We’re not having a party here!” I exclaim immediately, shoving past him and into the living room. I can hear Akor trotting at my heels like an obedient, besotted puppy.

Though...

I'm quite sure he'll kill me if he knows I'm mentally comparing him to a puppy.

Please don't be a mind reader. Please don't be a mind reader.

"Get out of my house," I say immediately, firmly, placing my hands on my hips.

All of the men are sprawled on various seats around my living room. It seems almost...odd to have them in such a location. They always act as if they're larger than life, more important than both Heaven and Hell combined. They possess an arrogance and imperiousness that others would kill to have. So seeing them in such a mundane setting? With legs thrown over couch arms? Flicking through the channels on my television? It's weird as fuck.

Van casts me a bored, almost lazy stare. His brown eyes, that auburn hair, the scruff on his jaw... He's so fucking beautiful that I physically have to wrench my head to the side to keep from staring at him like a freak. If I had to show a picture of the most beautiful man in the world, I would one hundred percent, without a doubt show a picture of Van Whatever-His-Last-Name-Is.

Do demons even have last names? Unless all of their last names are Dämon...

Clearing my throat awkwardly, I focus first on Zolroth perching daintily on the edge of my sofa. Out of all the demons, he looks as if he fits in the best here. He's immaculately groomed, as always, in a form-fitting black suit and abnormally shiny shoes. Seriously, I can see my reflection in those things. He embodies a grace and elegance that isn't seen in the other demons—though I'll never admit that to his face. He already seems to have a pretty big head. Probably on both ends.

Raz stands behind Zolroth with his arms crossed over his chest and a severe, unbending scowl on his ruggedly handsome face. What is that dude's problem? He looks as if he's constantly getting anal from that stick up his ass. Maybe he prefers giving instead of taking, if you know what I mean?

Unable to help myself when faced with an insufferable douchebag, I meet his glare with a heated one of my own. In that one, eloquent look, I speak all of the things I'll never dare say out loud.

You're destroying my life.

Why won't you just leave me alone?

Fuck you. And fuck your friends. And fuck me for wanting to fuck you in the first place.

He turns away abruptly, growling sharply under his breath, as if my mere presence is an annoyance to him. Dude, I feel that. I get that reaction from my parents almost every damn day of my life.

Unlike the five demons who seem to enjoy stalking me twenty-four-seven. Speaking of...

I don't see Kastros anywhere—

“Holy motherfucker of anus balls!” I curse when the giant in question appears directly over my shoulder. The thin black shirt he wears conforms to his muscular, enticing body. Even with the fierce scowl on his face, he's a sight to behold. There's no denying his raw sex appeal—not that anyone would.

Not that I should be thinking about his sex appeal in the first place.

Not that I *want* to think about his sex appeal in the first place.

Not that his sex appeal isn't appealing—

Knock it off, Katrina. Demons from Hell, remember? Probably going to murder you when this is all over.

Thanks, mental voice, I reply sardonically to myself. *Just what I wanted to remember.*

You're so very welcome.

“Did Akor tell you?” Zolroth queries, his honey-toned voice caressing my skin. It washes over me like a one-hundred-year-old bourbon. “We're going to a party tonight.”

“We are doing nothing,” I retort immediately, crossing my arms over my chest and mimicking Kastros’s favorite position. It suddenly occurs to me that I changed into a skimpy tank top and sleep shorts a little bit ago. No doubt, these demons are getting a front-row seat to nipples galore. Would it be obvious if I lifted my hands a little bit and covered my boobs? “I’m going to study and then go to bed. *You* are going to get the hell out of my house.”

“But, Katrina!” Akor whines, sidling up beside me. He places his head on my shoulder, his mohawk brushing against my cheek as he nuzzles the bare skin there. His arms wrap around my waist lightly. “You *have* to come.”

“I heard William is going to be there,” Van states softly from the sofa, but he appears annoyed by the fact. Actually, all of the demons look a little peeved, and Raz’s scowl deepens as he hurls daggers with his eyes at the coffee table.

“And *I*’m going to be there,” Akor insists. “Please, please, please, please!” As he begs, he begins to jump up and down, unintentionally making me bounce as well. The movement causes my breasts to jiggle, and ohmygawd.

Van, Zolroth, and Raz are staring intently at my chest, and there’s no denying the heat radiating from their eyes. Raz turns away first, as if he’s irritated with himself for looking in the first place, while Zolroth merely offers me a slow, lazy smile as he lifts his gaze from my boobs to my eyes. Only Van seems unconcerned as his tongue snakes out to lick his lush lower lip.

Is it suddenly hot in here? Or is it just my vagina?

“Akor, let me go!” I hiss, twisting and wiggling until he eventually releases me. He sighs petulantly as he pouts. Actually, honest-to-God pouts. It’s...not ridiculous, in all honesty. It’s kind of sexy.

“I’m not going to some stupid party,” I reiterate. “I need to babysit Adam.”

“That’s what the others are here for,” Zolroth announces with an easy-going grin. Heat and banked lust still warm his golden-brown eyes, liquefying my veins. “They’ll babysit him for you while we attend the party.”

And then...

I break into laughter. Clutch-your-chest-and-bend-over, hysterical laughter. Because, come the fuck on. Do they really think I’ll leave my little brother alone with them so I can attend a stupid-ass party?

I don’t trust them. At all. At this point, I believe that they’re obligated to help me win over William, but beyond that? I know nothing. When this is over, and William is desperately and hopelessly in love with me, then what’s next? Are they going to kill us? Eat our hearts? Sacrifice us to Satan? Feed us to goats? Yes, I read a lot of books. Yes, I watch a lot of horror movies.

No, I don’t want to die, thank you very much.

“Yeah, no. That’s not happening.” I swipe at the tears cascading down my cheeks as I attempt to pull myself together. “I say this with the utmost respect, but go fuck yourselves.”

“Kinky,” Akor breathes, a shit-eating grin erupting on his face. “I like it.”

“Maybe Wade will be there, too,” Zolroth retorts, and there’s something in his tone that I can’t quite place. Something dark and primal, almost akin to jealousy.

“Wade?” Raz whips his head up from where he was studying the polished floor. “Who the fuck is Wade? I thought you had a crush on William?” The last question is directed at me, accompanied by the nearly imperceptible narrowing of his eyes.

“Um...”

“I was cornered after school today,” Zolroth continues, flashing me a tight-lipped smile. Darkness lingers just beneath the surface, but where that darkness came from, I have no idea. “Some of the girls told me that Katrina was playing footsie with some dude named Wade during the

decathlon practice. Isn't that right, Kastros?" He turns towards the burly giant, who merely grunts in response, his impassive expression never changing as he levels me with an almost incandescent glare.

"Hold on! Hold on! Abort mission! Abort!" I hold my hands up placatingly.

"Why are you playing footsie with Wade?" Raz demands, his scowl etched firmly in place. I seriously wonder if that man ever smiles. Honestly? I don't think so. My guess is that he popped out of his mother like that. Or hatched from his egg like that? Or materialized in Hell's bowels like that?

Note to self—look up demon biology and how demon babies are made.

"Katrina! Why the fuck were you playing footsie with Wade?" he repeats in a low, guttural growl.

Hearing someone as domineering and haughty as Raz say "footsie" nearly sends me spiraling over the edge. I bite down on my lip to contain the sudden surge of giggles that wish to escape.

"He's an asshole on the team with us," I explain. "Trust me. We weren't playing *footsie*. I was actually trying to kick his ballsack."

The livid expressions on their faces transform into pain as they cup their hands over their pants.

"His ballsack. Really, Katrina?" Zolroth winces, as if *I'm* the horrible person here. Men and their cocks, I swear.

"I don't get why you guys were freaking out over... Where's Akor?" I glance over my shoulder anxiously, unable to spot his neon pink mohawk anywhere. Panic curdles low in my stomach as I attempt to get a grasp on my tumultuous emotions. Is he with Adam? Oh God. Did he go to see Adam?

The demons stare intently over my shoulder, and I turn just in time to see Kastros finish signing something. It's not normal sign language, though. I know at least *some* signs from when the doctors feared I would lose my hearing for good, after the accident. This must be DSL—Demon Sign Language.

“Kastros says that he saw Akor leave a minute ago,” Zolroth translates, brow cinched in concern. “With some... Fuck!”

“With some what?” I bite anxiously at my nail as the demons exchange a wary four-way glance.

“Oh, just all of your knives,” Van responds, already turning back towards the television, as if this conversation is boring him.

“What?!” I screech in alarm. “Why?”

“He’s probably going to the party,” Raz growls, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He’s going to try to kill Wade.”

“Wait! Back up! Slow down! Retreat! What is this about killing Wade with my fucking knives?” I fight off an encroaching headache as I glare at all of the demons.

“Zolroth?” Raz says evenly, turning towards the man in question. Zolroth nods immediately, standing from the couch, grabbing a fleeced-lined coat I hadn’t even noticed before and stalking toward the door. He pauses in the doorway, turning back to me with a blinding smile.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, beautiful,” he purrs, his accent curling around me before he disappears into the night.

I’m freaking flabbergasted. What is this about murder and knives and Wade?

“Don’t worry.” Van rolls his cinnamon eyes as he flips through the channels. “Zolroth will stop Akor before he goes...stabby.”

“Goes stabby?” I screech. Oh God. Is this my end? Dying of a brain aneurysm in a room full of demons too sexy for their own good?

“Katty?” Adam’s soft voice has me spinning on my heel, heart juddering up my throat until I’m practically choking on the damn organ. I quickly move to block him from entering the living room.

“Adam? What are you doing up? You should be in bed.” I try to keep the panic and unease out of my voice, but it creeps in unbidden, contaminating each word with its sickly poison.

“I thought I heard—Kastros!” My little brother’s sleepy face transforms into a bright, energetic smile as he rushes around me, towards the towering, silent giant.

Kastros’s face softens exponentially as he crouches down to scoop my brother up in his arms. Adam giggles as Kastros easily carries him in one arm, the demon’s expression more open and vulnerable than I’ve ever seen before.

And me?

I’m trying to get my erratic heartbeat under control and *not* vomit everywhere.

“Come see my new train!” Adam squeals eagerly as Kastros drops him back on his feet. Immediately, my little brother grabs his large hand in his tiny one. The mere difference in size astounds me and only ratchets up my fear. Kastros could quite literally wrap one of his giant paws around Adam’s neck and end his life.

Am I hyperventilating?

I’m totally hyperventilating.

“Raz! Come with us!” Adam turns pleading, Bambi eyes onto a still scowling Raz.

“I don’t think...” He anxiously flicks his gaze from me to Van, who is still sprawled out, surfing the channels.

“Please?” My little brother pushes out his lower lip as he places his hands together in the universal prayer position. I can still see indecision on Raz’s face, but after a moment, he sighs and walks over to take Adam’s proffered hand.

“Fine. But only for a little bit!”

All I can do is watch them go, feeling as if I’ve been run over repeatedly by a semi. My brain short-circuits as I lift my hands, wanting desperately to grab Adam and crush him to me.

“They won’t hurt him,” Van grumbles from his spot on the couch.

“What?” I whisper meekly, still trying to decide if it’s worth getting into a fight with the demons to get my brother away from them. They seem to be pretty attached to their balls. Maybe if I kick them there?

“We’re not psychopaths,” Van continues on a grunt. And then he smiles, as sharp as a razor blade. “At least, not to kids.”

Adam’s enthusiastic laugh drifts to us from upstairs, and that noise soothes something jagged and bent inside of me. Before I realize what I’m doing, I’m walking on mechanical legs towards Van and plopping down beside him on the opposite end of the couch. He eyes me with distaste before heaving out a sigh and focusing back on the television.

“What are...” I clear my throat. “What are you going to watch?”

“Dunno yet,” he mumbles, his way-too-pretty face twisted into something that’s half a scowl and half a pout. He pauses momentarily on *She’s the Man*, a movie about a girl who pretends to be her brother so she can play soccer on this elite school team. He nibbles on his lower lip as his eyes glimmer with mirth. That expression disappears immediately when he glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

Hurriedly, he switches it to some stupid golf tournament where a monotone announcer drawls on and on about absolutely nothing.

“We can watch the other movie,” I murmur awkwardly, shifting on the couch. I always thought this sofa was painfully uncomfortable. My parents definitely chose style over comfort when they picked this out.

“What?” Van snaps, whipping his head around to face me. I momentarily lose my capability of speech, my labored breathing coming out waaaay too fast for my lungs to handle. Why does he have to be so beautiful? Why does he have to resemble a mosaic you would see on a church’s wall, like an angel personified? But this angel is weeping death and destruction, the darkness he exudes an almost palpable entity that coats my skin like a sticky tar.

“We can watch *She’s the Man* if you want,” I offer tentatively. It’s an olive branch; hopefully, it’ll last long enough to spare my life. It’s dangling in

front of his face, and it's his choice whether he takes it or stomps on it. "I like that movie," I add, in case he needs an excuse to pick it.

He stares at me as though he's weighing whether I'm serious or not. But I wouldn't make fun of him. I know the first time he showed up in my house and confessed his love of rom-coms, he was embarrassed. But I'm not trying to get one over on him. I honestly like them too.

After a moment, he nods once.

"I suppose we can watch a chick flick," he grumbles, but there's a slight smile on his lips that wasn't there prior.

As the movie plays on, that timid grin blossoms into a full-blown smile as he laughs at the ridiculous romantic comedy. At one point, Van leaves the room, only to reappear with a tub of popcorn.

"How can they not tell she's a girl?" he gripes, tossing a popcorn kernel at the television.

"Right? She's too gorgeous to be a guy."

"Guys can be gorgeous too," he quips immediately, and my cheeks flush when I think, *Yes. You're living proof of that.*

But obviously, I don't say that out loud.

That would be weird.

"Fuck, I love this movie." Van leans forward so his arms are dangling off his knees. "Have you watched *Bridesmaids* yet? That's a good one."

"No! But I heard so much about it. Is it on Netflix?" I tuck my feet under me and turn slightly away from the movie, toward him.

"I don't know. But it's got the best shopping scene ever."

"Can't beat *Pretty Woman*," I counter. "It's a classic."

"Completely beats the skirt off *Pretty Woman*," he declares.

"Sacrilege!"

On and on we go, discussing in detail the various plot-holes we find as well as our favorite movies. *She's the Man* is forgotten as we debate best comedic scenes, and Van actually works up a neck blush because he gets so damn into it.

It's kind of...adorable.

Honestly, my feelings for these demons are giving me emotional whiplash. One second, I'm terrified of them, and the next, we're watching romantic comedies and gossiping like pre-teens at a slumber party. But I can't deny that the more time I spend with them, the more they grow on me. Like a mold. A disgusting, sexy mold.

If mold can be sexy, of course.

Which it can't.

But they are...

Stop thinking, Katrina.

Kastros and Raz reappear about thirty minutes into the film. Kastros immediately goes to lean against the wall, once more adopting his no-nonsense scowl with hard, granite-like eyes. Raz throws himself into the armchair, gaze fixed on me.

"Adam's asleep again," he tells me. "I read him a few bedtime stories, and he was out cold." Despite his apathetic expression, there's something soft in his voice. Something that demotes the scary demon from intimidating to approachable.

"I know," I admit unrepentantly. When he raises an eyebrow, I confess, "I checked on you guys a few times."

Van, still beside me but now even closer than before, snorts. "A few times? Try every five minutes."

"Only on commercial breaks!" I protest. "And when it went silent for longer than two minutes."

I expect Raz to be mad or even indignant, but instead, he smiles. Fucking smiles.

Good lord, if he wasn't pretty before, he's damn sure gorgeous now.

"You love him," he states candidly. "You love him as if he was your own child."

My blush comes on full force as I sheepishly pluck at the edge of my gray tank.

"He's my little brother," I admit at last. "And I know my parents won't give him the world, so why can't I?"

Before he can respond, the door careens open, bouncing against the wall with a deafening crash.

Instantly, all three demons are on their feet, standing in what almost appears to be a protective blockade in front of me.

"What the fuck?" Van curses as Kastros grabs my arm, gently—but very forcefully—pushing me behind his huge body.

"Errr, guys." Akor limps from around the corner, Zolroth directly behind him. Both men are covered in a myriad of bruises and gashes. Their mottled faces do little to distract from the anger burning in their eyes. Akor's smile is as dark and as haunting as a cemetery; it probably contains just as many dead bodies, too. He winces as he holds his dislocated shoulder. "We have a big fucking problem."



I HURRY FORWARD, my eyes roaming over both of them, horrified that the guys got hurt but also way too aware that my level of horror—like nine out of ten—is completely disproportionate to the amount of time I’ve known them. I try to shove that feeling aside as I mentally assess their injuries and decide what exactly I might have to treat them.

“I’ll grab ice. Go sit on the couch,” I order, hurrying into the kitchen. I shove open a drawer and grab two kitchen towels before I yank open the fridge and pull out the icemaker.

Fuck! What the hell happened to them? What could possibly hurt a demon? Is it still out there? Did they lead it here?

Shit.

My hands shudder like tambourines, and I end up spilling ice all over the floor, but I don’t pick it up. I just set the ice container on the countertop half full as I grab my two homemade ice packs and hurry back into the living room to see Akor slouched on the couch and Zolroth pacing, ignoring his own injuries.

I get there just in time to hear Van proclaim, “Our Center’s got to be close. It’s the only possible explanation.”

“Oh really? That’s a brilliant deduction. We hadn’t realized that. Are you certain you’re not an intelligence demon instead of lust? I mean...pure

genius.” Zolroth’s scorn flashes across the room like lightning. A tiny bit of lightning also appears in his palm.

My eyes widen, and my steps slow. “Um. Hi. Human here. Please don’t burn down my house. Or do. Whatever you want. Just let me get Adam out first.”

Zolroth turns toward me, and his eyes glow red for a second, the power in his palm sizzling brighter, until his gaze falls and he sees the ice packs in my hand. He swallows hard and closes his eyes. The crackling ball of lightning in his palm sizzles into nothingness, and when he reopens his eyes, their beautiful brown color has returned.

“What’s that?” he asks softly.

“Ice, for your faces.” I bite my lip. “Or does ice not work on demons? I don’t really know.” My sentence isn’t even finished before Akor’s at my side, good arm wrapping around my waist. He scoops me up single handed and carries me to the couch, where he plops down with me in his lap.

He helps lift my makeshift ice pack to his forehead, his hand covering mine. He nuzzles into the ice pack. “Take care of me, gorgeous.”

The other demons scoff and roll their eyes. Raz jerks his head toward the doorway, and the rest of them leave the room in a huddle, probably to discuss whatever the hell they were talking about when I walked in. The center ring of Hell or whatever.

Fine. Yeah, just walk away from your friend, I think. Let me play nurse. But really, they’re demons, so should I expect that much out of them? The way they played with Adam earlier, cheating to let him win Go Fish (which I saw during one of my very few, necessary checks on my brother’s safety), that’s clearly an exception.

I sigh as I look back down at Akor. But then I regret being a bitter Betty. He looks so pathetic and hurt that I find myself raising my hand to his cheek and gently stroking the uninjured skin there. “What happened?” I ask softly.

But Akor doesn’t answer. He just lets his eyelids flutter closed. “That feels so nice. Don’t stop.”

I let my fingers trail up and down his cheek as I note several evil-looking bruises on his neck that are changing color before my eyes. They go from purple to green to black within minutes, leaving me alarmed.

“Um, Akor. Are black bruises a normal demon thing?”

Is he dying?

He simply responds with a peaceful, “Mmmm.” Then he leans back on the couch, sliding us both so that his head can rest against the leather cushions. Once his head is comfortable, he moves me on his lap so that I end up right on top of a very solid bump.

Not dying then.

I quickly slide my ass down out of dangerous territory so that I’m sitting lower on his thighs.

Akor grumbles and tries to pull me back up onto his happy place. In an attempt not to piss off the unstable demon who left the house earlier with all of our knives, I reach up and stroke the side of his head, where his shorn hair is thin and blond. He liked me touching his cheek, so I gamble that he’ll like this too.

He moans, “Katrina, that feels so good.”

I keep stroking, and the words I naturally use on Adam pop out. “Shhh, you’ll be okay. I’m here. You’ll be okay.”

I note a trickle of blood near the neckline of his shirt and reach down, gently pulling back his shirt to see a jagged scratch running down his clavicle. It’s like someone or something clawed at him.

“Damn, you need some Band-Aids.” What he really needs is gauze, but I don’t say that. I don’t know if I have any in the house. I’ll have to look.

I move to stand up, but Akor clamps down on my hips and won’t let me move. “No, don’t go,” he whispers. “It’s been decades since someone’s touched me. Don’t stop.”

Of course, that makes me freeze.

Akor's expression is laced with so much pain and hurt—the kind that's not just physical, but emotional. A solitary tear gathers in the corner of one of his eyes when he opens them and lifts his blue gaze to mine.

I can't refuse him.

He's broken and hurting, jagged and chipped and raw, and he's asking me to hold his pieces so he doesn't break any further.

I can't say no.

I don't even want to.

"Move over," I grumble. I shove him up against the back of the couch, taking the ice pack away and setting it on the coffee table. Then I snuggle into him so that we're lying front to front, every part of me touching every part of him.

I've never done this before, so for a second, I feel awkward and nervous and worried that he might get the wrong idea. But then I see his face.

The solitary tear has transformed into tear tracks. Droplets race down Akor's cheeks.

I don't know what happened tonight. I don't know who hurt him or why. I don't know how. I just know I'm desperate not to see him look so sad.

I wrap my arms around his waist and hug him tight, pouring all my empathy into that hug. "It's going to be alright. I'll make it better."

I feel Akor's warm arms surround me, along with a musky, earthy scent that's almost like patchouli but not. It smells good.

"I didn't even get to kill the footsie guy." Akor's voice is husky and full of regret.

"Hey, you don't need to kill the footsie guy," I tell him, half alarmed he's upset about this and half concerned that he still wants to kill Wade.

"He violated you," Akor growls.

"He stomped my foot. It's a thing we do. We call it Pain and Gain."

“What?” Akor’s finger slides under my chin, and he lifts my face gently until our eyes meet.

“You know the saying... ‘no pain, no gain?’ Well, if we get a question wrong, we kick each other. Saying it out loud, I realize how stupid that sounds. But it actually works.”

For a second, I swear I can see white, delicate horns glittering on the sides of Akor’s temples. They aren’t normal horns, if you count the human artwork through the centuries as normal. They have crazy branches in every direction, and every tip looks sharp enough to carve out a heart. But they’re also incredibly beautiful.

When Akor realizes I’m staring at them, they disappear from sight with a little pop.

“Sorry. You made me horny.” Akor grins and swivels his hips into mine, then laughs outrageously when I scramble backwards and fall off the couch onto my ass.

“Dick!” I accuse, half-joking.

Akor sits up with a groan, and I realize that the wound on his chest has soaked his shirt. “Shit! I should have gotten you a Band-Aid already. I’ll be right back!”

I run for the stairs, because for some dumb reason, we keep all the Band-Aids and wound cream in the upstairs bathroom instead of the powder room off the living room. It makes so much sense, because Adam needs lots of Band-Aids when he plays Legos and none at all when he plays outside.

I squat down and grab what I can, fist-pumping when I find a little square of gauze. Hands full, I head back down the stairs. But I pause halfway down when I hear the guys arguing.

I just bolted past them on the way up, but now, I can hear the angry pitch of their voices, even though they’re trying to use hushed tones.

“It better not be her!” Zolroth’s British accent can’t sound threatening, no matter how hard he tries.

“It’s not,” Raz growls.

Her? Who are they talking about? Did a female demon do this to them? Immediately, that thought sets off a bear trap inside my chest. It snaps shut with bone-crushing force.

I’ll kill her.

Whoa.

Back up. Rewind. I’m not killing anyone.

But there’s a part of me that’s breathing hard and taking practice jabs at the air. Seeing Akor cry... Whoever did this made a fucking demon cry! That’s a whole new level of evil.

Is there a level of evil worse than demons?

I halt my thoughts in order to listen and figure out who this mystery demon woman is.

I sit down on the stairs, suddenly grateful that my dad insisted on gaudy marble on the bannister and posts, because that makes me harder to see in the dark. I peer between the railings to watch Kastros sign at the other two.

“Don’t even go there! You stepped down, or you’d know!” Raz growls.

Zolroth’s bruised eyes narrow on Kastros’s huge form, and he crosses his arms. A gash in his lip weeps a little as he says, “Didn’t you get hurt around here? It was this town, right? She’s got to be here! She has to live here! Close by. Why the hell didn’t you find her and get rid of the problem?”

Kastros shakes his head without responding, glares at Raz, and then stomps out the front door without so much as a goodbye.

Zolroth’s eyes glow red, and for the first time, I see a scary demon rather than a posh, sophisticated man in his place. “He’s hiding something.”

“He doesn’t like feeling vulnerable. None of us do,” Raz says.

“Damn straight. You’d better scour the damn town for her, because we’re gonna find her and end this shit. I’m not having any damn Center mess

things up for us.”

“I will. But I already told you, we should have refused this summons.”

“Couldn’t. It was our number,” Zolroth responds. “None of the other squadrons would have taken it anyway. Not with the big battle going on down South and a chance to put those cherubs in their place.”

“Staying here is stupid,” Raz retorts, getting heated. “With our Center around, we’re fucking vulnerable.”

“Yeah! I bloody well fucking know!” Zolroth points at his own eye, which is swollen. “I experienced it first-hand. But you know what happens if we back out on a summons and a chance to *convert* someone.”

Convert someone?

To Jesus?

To *Satan*?

What does that even mean?

There’s silence for a moment, and I use that time to try to process what I’m hearing. I can hardly follow their conversation. I mean, I can guess the battle with cherubs means angels, maybe that’s a derogatory term? But what the hell is a center? Is it my town? A place?

Zolroth’s voice is low as he announces, “If I find our Center, I’ll kill her.”

Oh. Question answered. A Center is a person. Well then, I’m on board. Let’s find this she-demon bitch and off her.

Zolroth and Raz whip around and stare at me. And I realize that my stupid mouth once again blurted things out and I’ve been caught spying on demons.

Insert face into palm.



WHEN I CURL up in bed, I have a hard time falling asleep because my mind is still whirling.

The guys laughed at me when they'd heard me spout off about killing demons. I'd started to get embarrassed, until Zolroth had scooped me up into his arms and called my violent tendencies "adorable."

My mind keeps flickering over how I'd felt as I applied wound cream to Zolroth's cuts and bruises. I'd had to bite down on my lip in order to keep silly, girlish smiles from constantly creeping over my lips as Zolroth complained that he wasn't a child who needed a nursemaid. But somehow, despite his verbal protests, he kept unbuttoning his stained, collared shirt and finding new scratches for me to treat. My hands had gotten to slide over his abs.

Real man abs. Or demon abs, I guess, if you want to be technical about it.

I'd gotten to touch them. Not just ogle from afar, not just imagine them as I read a dirty book, but *touch* them.

And then after Zolroth, I'd gone to treat Akor. His eyes had burned a path from my heart right down to my panties as I'd gently taped gauze over his scratch.

I swallow hard and squeeze my eyes shut, my fingers clenching the covers tightly.

It's not real, I tell myself.

I think about the lust that Van exudes and how it's been making people at school go crazy. Four students were hauled out of the bathrooms earlier today for getting it on during school hours, because he saturates the very air with lust.

That's all this is.

It's not real. It's not like what I feel for William.

I picture William's face as I snuggle into my pillow and force myself to take deep, calming breaths. It works for a minute, but his face is quickly replaced by Raz's face leaning over my own, his dark eyes soft for once.

Somehow, a tender look on Raz's face is shoving away my daydreams about William. Maybe because finding a gentle expression on that asshole's face seems even more impossible than getting William to like me?

But I'd seen Raz's eyes go soft earlier tonight.

Heat flares in my stomach as I think about the she-demon that is apparently out to get my guys. This Center. I'd panicked, of course, as soon as I'd learned about it and gotten caught—launching into the guys and going on a tear.

Raz had been the tiniest bit sympathetic to my fear at first, particularly when I started spouting off about demons attacking Adam. That was when the Hell's-frozen-over, call-an-ambulance-because-I'm-hallucinating, soft eyes had come out and stunned me into silence.

“No she-demons are going to attack you. Demons don't attack humans. We only fight angelic bastards.” The tender look had faded as Raz's normal asshole expression returned, and he added, “So stop freaking out and being dramatic.”

Dickwad.

Like I know all the rules of Heaven and Hell.

I blow a raspberry at no one and quickly decide that's a terrible idea, because the spit ends up all over my pillow and I have to swap it for the cold one on the other side of my queen-sized bed.

Dammit.

It takes twice as long for me to fall asleep with a cold pillow. But gradually, my brain drifts off, and when I dream, I end up in my favorite place.

The cloud meadow is lit from below with soft pink light, as if it's dawn somewhere beneath us. My feet sink into the plush clouds under me, and the biggest smile of all brightens my face. I love it here. Something about this meadow just puts my soul at ease.

I glance around, but I don't see Ziel yet. So instead, I wander over to the tiny thunderheads. I sit down cross-legged in front of a row of them that are smaller than the palm of my hand and watch the lightning dance across their dark little surfaces.

When I'm tired of that, I dawdle through the space, possibly farther than I've ever been before. I crest a small hill in the clouds and find a patch of rainbows that are as tall as my hips, growing out of the clouds and swaying gently in the breeze like reeds. A giggle flies out of my mouth unbidden because they're just so beautiful.

I skip through the rainbows, letting my hands run across their silky surfaces—they feel like ribbons—and then realize there's another new section of the meadow I've never seen before. I rush forward to find a pond filled with stars.

The dark surface of the water glitters, sparkles. Beneath the surface, stars dart like tiny fish, zooming around one another, colliding and making brilliant orange and purple supernovas. I'm awed, as if I'm staring down into a miniature of the universe itself.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Ziel appears beside me.

I'm so startled, I nearly fall into the pond, but Ziel's thick arm shoots out and pulls me back to safety.

I stare up into his eyes—tonight, Ziel is a handsome Chinese warrior—and smile. “Next time, warn a girl, will you?” I flick his red cape playfully.

“Kinda hard to make noise when you’re walking on clouds,” he replies with a grin.

“You could whistle,” I suggest.

“I don’t *whistle*.” He bristles as if that is the most unmanly suggestion ever.

“You sure?” I ask, feeling a challenge and rising to it. Somehow, with Ziel, I don’t feel as awkwardly self-conscious as I do in real life. Somehow, maybe because I know I’m dreaming, I feel flirty and fun and all those things that I stumble over like a drunken cow during my waking hours.

I glance coyly at Ziel before I start to saunter through the rainbow reeds. Ziel follows behind, and I’m pretty damn sure he’s watching my ass. I give it a little extra sway as I whistle the theme from *The Andy Griffith Show*, the only show I was allowed to watch at Grandma’s when I was younger. I deliberately stop mid-song to see if Ziel will rise to the occasion.

He narrows his eyes and crosses his arms. And for a second, a strange sense of *déjà vu* washes over me. Ziel reminds me of someone else. But before I can put my finger on just who...he starts to whistle.

My smile is as happy as the rainbows I walk through. “Ha! Gotcha!”

“You think you got me? I’ll get you!” Ziel chases me.

I sprint away, laughing and clutching my sides as I scramble up the hill. His longer legs quickly overtake me, and he scoops me up from behind and spins me around, faster and faster until my legs fly up.

“I’m gonna get sick!” I protest.

“No you aren’t! This is a dream. You’ll only get sick if you believe you’ll get sick.” Ziel stops spinning me and instead leaps into the air with me still in his grasp.

I lose my breath, and my stomach plummets. I close my dream eyes and wait for us to fall back down. Only...we don’t fall.

We stay floating in midair.

I glance down and realize we're still gently rising, drifting through the air like we're in a hot air balloon. Only there is no balloon. Just us.

I clutch Ziel behind me and feel his fingers dig hard into my hips before he gently releases them and turns me in his arms. I wrap mine around his neck in wonder. "Are you flying?"

"We're flying," he corrects.

"No. I know we're flying. But are you doing it?" Every word I say gets softer as I realize how much of me is touching Ziel. I've never been this close to him. All the months we've met, and I've never once stroked the back of his neck—shit! What are my fingers doing?

I pull my hand away, but Ziel just slides his hand down my arm and pulls my hand back to its former spot.

"I liked that," he says softly.

I swallow hard.

I stare into his eyes, which are currently in the middle of changing from a deep brown to a striped grey.

What is happening?

Panic starts to unfurl inside me. Because I think I know what's happening. I'm trembling and exalted all at once, because I see this deep reverence in Ziel's eyes as he looks at me. When someone hands you that kind of power over themselves, it's scary. I'm full of awe, but also full of fear—because I don't know how to handle that level of emotion.

Ziel moves one of his hands to the back of my head, the base of my neck. And he starts to massage me there.

My eyes automatically shut. If I were a dog, my tail would start thumping and my back leg would start twitching in pleasure, because he rubs just the right spot.

"Tell me about today," Ziel gently orders as we float above the clouds.

I tell him. When I finish, he stops massaging me. Reluctantly, I peel my eyelids open to stare up at him. A frown mars his beautiful face, which has transformed again. His skin is now the darkest ebony and contrasts with his striped grey eyes.

“Katrina, please. You *need* to stay away from those demons.” Ziel looks almost angry in his insistence.

He’s never been angry at me before.

“I already told them to leave. They say they can’t.”

His nostrils flare. “Demons lie.”

“I don’t think they’re lying about this.”

“They don’t have your best interests at heart,” he growls.

I get defensive and pull back a little, but Ziel mashes me to him. “How the hell would you know?” I say, as I shove against his shoulder.

“I don’t want you to get hurt—”

“They aren’t hurting me,” I argue. “Humiliating? Possibly. But actually hurting? So far, they’ve just done a bunch of misconceived, well-intentioned things—”

“They *will* hurt you.”

And though I’ve been scared of the very same thing myself, I become infuriated when Ziel says it. “They won’t!” I snap, shoving harder against his massive pecs. I’m suddenly desperate to get away. I feel like he’s tainting me. Trying to turn me against them. And something deep inside me screams like a banshee in rebellion. I wedge one of my legs up as I snap, “Why the fuck does it matter to you anyway?”

I get good leverage—finally—and kick off away from Ziel.

But instead of floating in the sky like I expect, once I’m out of his arms, I plummet. I plummet through space, and through the cloud meadow—which feels like nothing but wet, insubstantial fog—down through the sunset, pelting toward earth like a raindrop.

And the only thing I can hear, other than the wind whipping my ears, is Ziel's answer on repeat in my mind.

"Because I love you."

His words slash my chest to ribbons because I wish more than anything—maybe even more than getting a shot with William—that Ziel was real. But he's not. He's a dream lover. Too perfect to be true.

I wake up and find my pillow soaked with tears.



TODAY IS the worst day of my life.

And that's saying something, considering I just had five demons in my house the night before.

I heard from Sarah, who heard from Dianna, who heard from Billy, who heard from Mallory, that William Washington has a date with Janie tonight.

A date.

A freaking date.

My heart feels like it's being shredded into impossibly small confetti pieces, littering the floor around me. Because, yeah, it hurts like a bitch, especially since I thought...

Well, is it stupid to have believed that William liked *me*?

Honestly, I don't know why I'm even surprised. She's five foot six with slender legs, shimmery blonde hair, and sensual features. And I'm...me. I'll never be good enough for the likes of William fucking Washington.

But that doesn't stop the pain from percolating in my stomach, threatening to expel its contents. I can get a dream guy to fall in love with me, but a real guy?

I'll be the first to admit that I wallowed throughout the day. During gym, when that asshole Raz demanded I participate in the group game of volleyball, I purposely aimed the ball at Janie whenever it came in my direction. And for lunch, I grabbed a bag of cheese puffs and a bottle of Mountain Dew, and then sat on the closed bathroom toilet seat, listening to Celine Dion's "All By Myself."

Even Zolroth couldn't penetrate the depressive fog I found myself in, though he sure as hell tried.

In decathlon, I ignore everyone and take a seat near the back of the room, content to press my nose into the study guide and memorize my ass off. I become distinctly aware of a towering silhouette stealing the remaining light from the room. Blinking, I glance up at Kastros's scowling face. He reaches over and touches my hair, pulling out a... Well, I'll be damned. That's one of the M&Ms from my second hour pity snack fest. How did that get there?

Ignoring the ogling girls and the wary boys, Kastros grabs my wrist and practically drags me out of the classroom and into the hall. Van, Zolroth, and Raz all stand in a haphazard semi-circle, similar expressions of irritation etched onto their ridiculously handsome faces.

"What?" I growl, struggling against Kastros's iron grip.

"You can't keep fucking doing this." Raz's voice is a rumble that reverberates through my body. Husky and almost primitive in nature. His eyes hurl daggers in my direction as he leans against the closest locker and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Doing what?" I demand. Honestly, I haven't been doing *anything* today. Literally. Unless they count the time in third hour when I watched *Sixteen Candles* on my phone while the teacher lectured. Or in fourth hour when I traded a pack of gum for an entire box of cereal that Manny Brooks always brings to class, just so I could binge eat and forget my troubles. Or the time—

"You're fucking pouting." Van makes a face at me, as if my teenaged troubles are so far beneath him. "It's irritating."

“I am *not* pouting,” I protest immediately.

In answer, Kastros grabs another strand of my bright pink hair and pulls out a... Is that a piece of chicken? When the fuck did I have chicken—

Ohhhh. Fifth hour. I paid Martin Smiles—the resident stoner—to pick up a bucket of KFC. Stace, being the perfect friend she is, even went as far as to stop at the nearby gas station and grab me a tub of mint chocolate chip. She didn’t necessarily understand *why* I needed my go-to comfort food, but she’s my ride or die bitch and supports me unconditionally.

“What the hell do you even see in that guy?” Raz explodes, throwing his hands up into the air. It almost sounds as if he’s actually *growling*. Honest-to-God growling, like he’s some sort of feral hyena set loose on the unsuspecting population. “You know what? Don’t answer that.”

“Fuck you.” I mimic his posture, crossing my arms over my chest and leveling him with an almost incandescent glare. “And fuck you, you, and you too.” I direct the last line at Van, Zolroth, and Kastros respectively.

“You wish,” Van snorts.

“No, I don’t actually! I wish I was fucking William! But no. You all are the worst demon matchmakers in the history of ever!” I’m super articulate when I’m pissed.

“Hey, you just need to stick with the plan. Jealousy will win out,” Zolroth reassures me.

“Whose jealousy? Mine? While William’s tongue is down Janie’s throat —”

Raz grabs my arm. “Shut up.”

Van grabs *him*. “Dude, you can’t touch her in school. You’re supposed to be her teacher.”

Raz doesn’t speak, his breathing coming out in stuttered spurts like he has just run a marathon or like he’s holding himself back. His eyes flash red for a second as he stares at me. Tension builds between us, as hot and thick

as steam in a sauna. Why the fuck is he so pissed about this? I'm pissed at him for being pissed.

But then something changes. For a split second, I swear his eyes change color again.

Nope. I'm delusional. There's only burning red.

Raz's expression crumbles. And I don't understand why, but don't have time to process it because Kastros yanks Raz away and Zolroth steps smoothly into his space.

"Baby girl," Zolroth takes a step closer to me, a mischievous smile illuminating his normally serious face, "if William has a date tonight, then we have our first date tonight."



I DON'T KNOW WHY I AGREED TO THIS. HONESTLY, I HAVE NO FUCKING IDEA *why I agreed to this*. A momentary lapse of sanity? Sheer stupidity? Jealousy?

Either way, I find myself waiting on the front porch at exactly seven sharp. I hired Sasha to babysit Adam tonight, and the fiery redhead had been over-the-moon at my offer to pay her time and a half for her services. I don't know where Mom and Dad are, and honestly? I don't give a crap. It's not like they give a shit about me in the first place.

All Zolroth said was, "Wear something cute but casual. No skirt," before swaggering away with that damn, devilish (see what I did there?) smirk on his gorgeous face. I'm pretty sure Raz blew a gasket, and I can't help but remember his words from the night before.

"With our Center around, we're fucking vulnerable."

What did he mean by that, exactly? And what is a Center? He speaks as if it's capitalized, as if it's immensely important, but when I googled it this morning, I hadn't been able to find anything. And Zolroth had implied it's a she. A she-demon? Like the one who attacked Akor and him last night?

Why are they so susceptible to she-demons? Feminine wiles, or something else?

Confusion swirls in my head like a rapidly growing tsunami, threatening to completely devour entire cities and demolish buildings. I'll have to ask the guys about it later on. Well, demand and threaten. I don't think they'll answer my questions if I politely and calmly ask.

They can be pricks, those demons.

I smooth my hands down my new pair of skinny jeans I bought months ago but have never worn. They conform to my thighs and calves like a second, dark blue skin. And bonus, these actually have working pockets. Who would've thought? I'm wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder sweater that reveals the pink strap of my bra. Not that I'm wearing a sexy bra for Zolroth, of course. Nope. Not me. Nada.

Oh hi, denial, my old friend.

I have no idea where, exactly, we're going, but I *do* know that William and Janie will be there as well on their date. Vomit.

No, literally.

I vomited when I first discovered they were going on a date. Honestly, as far as supernatural matchmakers go, the demons deserve a solid zero out of five stars on Yelp. Do not recommend.

Trepidation courses through me as I tap my foot against the distressed wooden boards of the front porch. Fuck, what am I doing? Am I really going on a date with Zolroth in order to make William jealous?

Yes. Yes, I am.

Does that make me a horrible, shitty person?

Yes. Yes, it does.

Okay, mental voice. Time for you to shut the fuck up.

I wouldn't be doing all of this if I didn't honestly believe that William has feelings for me. I can see it in his eyes when he thinks I'm not looking.

There's definitely infatuation mixed with a healthy dose of lust. And when he offers me that crooked smile, a twinkle appearing in his eyes...

Ugh, I'm melting. Literally melting into a puddle of mush and feelings.

"Wow." The soft, almost reverent, whisper shakes me out of my reverie. I snap my head up, stunned to see Zolroth standing directly in front of me. I hadn't even heard him arrive.

His eyes are wide as they travel over my body from head to toe. It feels as if he's physically caressing my skin, his gaze as soft as a moth's wing. Butterflies erupt in my stomach before I can poison the damn things. But how can I *not* get goosebumps when he's staring at me like that? Like... I'm beautiful. Like I matter.

It's so easy to forget that Zolroth is a demon from Hell. My mouth waters and my hands turn slick as I devour Zolroth with my eyes as thoroughly as he does me. He's a fucking masterpiece, chiseled muscles easily accentuated in the form-fitting suits he loves to wear. This one is a dark shade of gray with a blue tie that surprisingly matches my sweater, though how he knew the color of my clothes remains an unsolved mystery. His short, nearly buzzed, black hair is gelled away from his artfully handsome and arresting face. And though he usually radiates confidence and something akin to elegance, today he appears almost nervous as he fumbles with something in his back pocket.

"Here," he says, his delectable accent washing over me like a tidal wave. He hands me another fuzzy, black box, this one significantly smaller than the first.

"If you're fucking proposing to me, so help me..." I murmur as I use the tip of my finger to slide the box open. Instead of an engagement ring—thank fuck, I might've actually died—I see a pair of gorgeous silver earrings. An emerald rests snugly in the center of each one, surrounded by five diamond hearts. They have to be worth a small fortune, and my mouth literally hangs open like I'm in *The Conjuring* or some shit and I'm the creepy ass ghost haunting the joint. "That's my birthstone," I state stupidly, pointing first towards one dangling earring and then the next. "And diamonds. Actual diamonds."

Oh, sweet nibblets.

Sweet nibblets? Really? Fuck, I'm officially losing my mind.

"Fuck, I love them," I breathe. "Thank you."

"I wanted to get you something nice," Zolroth admits, and I could be mistaken—I usually am—but it almost appears as if he's blushing. Zolroth, a sexy as fuck demon with an elegance that puts the Queen of England to shame, is blushing, the delicate crimson climbing up his neck and staining his cheeks red.

"Are you...are you blushing?" I ask in disbelief as I pierce first one ear and then the other. I swear, with every second that passes, Zolroth's blush deepens exponentially.

The demon scoffs. "Of course not. I merely have an allergy."

"An allergy that causes you to blush?" I cock an eyebrow as I shake my head from side to side, admiring the way the earrings jingle.

"It's a rash," he protests immediately, vehemently. The look he throws me is capable of freezing over lava. "Just a rash. From allergies."

"Demons don't get allergies!" a voice mock-whispers from...up above. I tilt my head back—and back some more—until I see Akor resting indolently on the top of a dangerously thin branch. He rests his chin on his arms as he smiles down at us. "Hi."

"Hi." My voice is annoyingly small as I tentatively smile up at him.

"For fuck's sake..." Zolroth grumbles, placing his hand on the small of my back. "We're leaving."

"Wait!" Akor clamors to his feet, using the trunk of the tree for balance, and procures a large, archaic camera seemingly out of thin air. "I need to take a picture to commemorate the occasion! Now, hold still. It should only take about fifteen minutes. But no fucking moving, or we'll need to start again."

Zolroth lowers his head so his lips are millimeters from my ear. "On the count of three, run."

“Huh?” I blink at him stupidly...and then blink at him again as I’m struck by the sheer perfection of the man before me. Really, all I’m capable of around him is blinking and acting like a complete and utter idiot. But it’s fine. It’s cool. It’s all good.

“Three.”

Zolroth takes my hand and races down the driveway, ignoring Akor’s disgruntled shouts and threats from behind us. A giggle climbs up my throat as we head towards a sleek red sports car resting at the bottom of my driveway. I don’t know much about cars, besides my dream one, but even I can see that this beauty is worth more than my entire life. It’s fucking perfection, and even sitting still, I know it’ll be fast.

“Come to mamma,” I purr, folding the top of my body over the hood of the car. Apparently, I don’t know how to human when I’m around pretty things. But can you blame me? I’d literally sell my soul for something like this.

“You like it?” Zolroth’s voice lowers to a seductive purr as his fingers trail across the roof, stopping inches from my face. “You wanna ride it? Want to feel it vibrate underneath you? Hear it growl?”

I’m, like, ninety-nine percent sure there’s a sexual innuendo somewhere in his words, but I’m too lost in my car-inspired bliss to care.

“Take me home, Daddy,” I sigh dreamily, and this time, Zolroth can’t contain his snort of amusement.

“For one, your dad is a prick, so don’t ever call me that. I’m not into daddy play...but you can call me Sir. And second, get your cute ass in the car before Akor ties us up and takes his damn picture. Because trust me, he will.”

I take one last lingering sniff of the car—nearly creaming my panties—before sliding into the passenger seat.

And oh Mylanta. The interior is just as mind-numbingly orgasmic as the exterior. From the black leather seats to the highlighted dashboard to the... is that a fucking red button? I really, really want to push it now.

Zolroth climbs into the driver's seat, a smug, self-satisfied grin etched across his handsome face. He brushes his hand across the top of the dashboard, his honey-brown eyes sliding in my direction.

"Maybe I'll let you ride me back." He smirks, putting the car into reverse. "Sorry. I meant, maybe I'll let you drive her back."

That is full-on innuendo, but I let it slide because this car is gorgeous and I really do want to drive it home.

"Does she have a name?" My eyes flicker to the enticing red button mocking me. Fuck, I really, really, *really* want to push it. Just one little push. One teeny, *tiny* little push.

For the second time tonight, Zolroth's face turns bright scarlet.

"Icalerkat."

"Huh?"

He clears his throat uncomfortably as we merge into traffic. "I call her, um, Cat."

"Cat like meow, or Kat like a girl's name?" I turn in my seat to face him completely, but his eyes remain fixated pointedly on the road.

"Thesecone." He speaks so quickly, the words blend together.

"What?"

"The second one," he admits in a rush, and my heart tap-dances in my chest. He named his car, this glorious beauty of orgasmic proportions, after me? Or after a different girl named Kat?

And why does that thought send a shot of jealous indignation straight to my heart? I ignore the unbridled rage that swarms through me like I've kicked over an angry hornet's nest. Nope. Not doing that today, thank you very much. I'm going to pretend he named this beauty after me, though there's no possible way, considering we just met... Still, delusions are nice.

Yup. I'm totally pretending this sexy car is named after me. Totally pretending this date is real. Damn. I don't want to even think about what level of messed up that makes me.

"Where exactly are we going?" I query, pressing my palms flush against the cold leather and caressing it like one would a lover. Yeah, I'm totally stealing this car as soon as this date is over. Zolroth can cry me a fucking river.

Raking a hand through his short-cropped hair, the posh demon grins. "We're going bowling."



THE BOWLING ALLEY—OR BAS (Bowling Athletic Shop) for short—is located only fifteen minutes away from my house. When we pull into the parking lot, I’m unsurprised that it’s already crowded, people teeming in and out of the modestly-sized building. It’s only one level with a fading sign that displays a smiling red bowling ball barreling into ten terrified pins. The slogan “Ram Those Pins” is displayed in fluorescent lights over the dilapidated sign.

There are very, very few things you can do for a date in our small town. We have a movie theater, of course, and a miniature golf course, but the bowling alley is by far the most popular location, mainly because it’s not merely bowling. It serves shitty, plastic-tasting pizza and beer, and it has an arcade as well as a section with escape rooms that cost an arm and a leg to attend. It’s also located a few miles away from the high school, making it a prime location for unruly teens to gather after school.

When we enter, I’m instantly barraged by the scent of stale sweat and alcohol. Almost every lane is full; I spot numerous families, a few bowling groups, and more than five various school groups. And there, giggling amongst themselves, are William Washington and Janie St. James.

Jealousy plows into me like a ram charging at full speed. I couldn’t possibly escape the emotion, even if I wanted to. It commands my

complete and utter attention, momentarily keeping my feet cemented to the ground.

All I can do is stare at William as he tenderly brushes a string of Janie's bleached blonde hair behind her ear. She giggles, the sound curling around me like a tightening leash, and he smiles cheekily at her, flashing her his adorable, sexy, wonderful, beautiful, hot, amazing, *lickable* dimples.

Have I ever mentioned that I really, really like dimples?

"I don't think I can do this," I whimper as pain unfurls in my chest like a pesky weed, destroying everything that was once beautiful. The feelings I had in the car on the way here, the feelings I momentarily felt for Zolroth, dissipate at the overwhelming tidal wave of pain.

Because, fuck, my heart is breaking into thousands of delicate shards, and I'm not sure anything—or anyone—is capable of gluing them back together.

Zolroth, looking completely out of place in his suit, drapes an arm over my shoulder. The weight of it shouldn't feel as comforting as it does. Why do I have the irresistible urge to nestle against him, to burrow into his side until you can't discern where he ends and I begin?

I blame it on the car. My panties are still slightly damp from that bad bitch.

"You got this," he whispers in my ear. This close, I can't help but note that he smells distinctly like cinnamon. It's such an odd smell on a man, but it somehow fits Zolroth's personality perfectly. He'll never be an outdoorsy type of guy, and I don't want him to be. I much prefer this natural, sweet scent combined with the peppermint of his toothpaste.

And...

Now I'm sniffing him like a total creeper.

Fuck.

Zolroth lowers his arm from my shoulder before placing his hand on the small of my back and guiding me towards the shoe rental stand. A familiar

man smiles zealously when I approach, his gorgeous green eyes languidly trailing up and down my body...and completely ignoring Zolroth still standing directly behind me.

“Jason,” I say in greeting, nodding curtly at the jock from school. His smile widens to almost dopey proportions.

“Katrina. I didn’t expect to see you here.” He places his elbows on the counter and leans forward almost imperceptibly. If he were a woman, I would say he was trying to flash me a hint of cleavage. Instead, I’m pretty sure he’s trying to show off his impressive biceps and the smooth contours of his muscles beneath the thin black BAS shirt he wears.

“Yeah, you know me. A bowling fanatic,” I quip sarcastically, because everyone in the world knows that I’m more likely to smack myself in the face with a bowling ball than actually hit a pin.

“Let me guess? You bowl a three-hundred on average?” he teases, and I can’t help but notice he has exponentially beautiful eyelashes. Seriously, it almost appears as if he’s wearing mascara. They’re thick and luscious and a sooty black; all I can do is stare at them in abject wonderment.

“Subtract a couple hundred, and you have your answer,” I reply. I can feel the heat of Zolroth’s body as he steps up behind me, his warmth almost palpable. It seeps through my skin and sets my veins on fire. When his chest is flush to my back, I note for the first time how stiff he is, how tense. What the fuck is his problem?

“I’m sure you’re not that bad. Honestly?” Jason leans even closer—close enough for me to see a scatter of delicate freckles on his nose and cheekbones. “I once bowled a thirty-two.”

“You did not,” I say with a snort. “That’s like a hairdresser with a hideous bowl-cut. Impossible.”

“It’s true!” he protests, biting down on his lower lip. But I *still* can’t draw my attention away from his fucking eyelashes. Seriously, how did he get them so full? I’m actually kind of jealous. I don’t wear makeup normally, and when I do, my lashes always appear clumpy. What I wouldn’t give to have natural lashes like his.

A throat very pointedly clears behind us, and I turn, leaning to the side to see around Zolroth, to see all of the demons. Somehow, the rest of them showed up here, even Akor, whom we left at my house. And they're all glaring at us, their eyes spewing vitriol. Raz's teeth are clenched so tightly, I'm afraid he's going to break his jaw. His hands are clenched into fists, and Van has one hand on his shoulder, as if to hold him back. The lust demon isn't faring much better. He's glaring at Jason with so much fury, it deserves to have its own element on the periodic table. Kastros has his muscular arms crossed over his chest as he scowls. Honestly? He's intimidating as fuck on a normal day, but right then, he is piss-your-pants scary. Zolroth is *still* pressed against my back, so close that I can't read his expression, but if his taut body is any indication, he's as angry as the rest of them. Why are they all even here?

And what the fuck is their problem?

Do they not like Jason for some reason?

I don't know the guy well, but he seems nice enough. Talkative, for sure. None of that explains why the demons are staring at him as if they wish to remove his spleen from his body and then eat it.

And Akor...

The pink-haired demon stands off to the side, a cold, malicious smile curling up his pink lips. Something undefinable dances in his eyes. Something calculating, almost, like a scientist preparing to cut into a frog and dissect it.

"Um...s-size five, please," I stammer, refocusing back on Jason. I wonder what he's thinking right now. The gym teacher, the counselor, and the decathlon coach all head to the bowling alley together... I'm sure there's a joke in there somewhere.

I can't help but notice that Jason seems slightly disappointed, his shoulders physically sagging, but he grabs me a pair of shoes without complaint.

Voice thunderous, Zolroth growls, "Size thirteen."

After we receive our shoes and pay for a lane, Zolroth leads me away from Jason as fast as humanly—cough, demonly, cough—possible. He’s muttering beneath his breath, voice too low for me to hear. When we reach the empty lane Jason indicated, surrounded on one side by a young family and the other by William and Janie, Zolroth mutters, “You were looking into his eyes.”

“What?” I squeak, acutely aware of William trailing his fingers along the underside of Janie’s jaw. What would it feel like if he did that to me? Would goosebumps follow in his wake? Would he tilt my chin further back and press his lips to—

“That asshole worker,” Zolroth growls. “You were staring into his eyes all lovey-dovey.”

All lovey-dovey?

What the ever-loving fuck is he going on about this time?

“Dude, I was jealous of his eyelashes, that’s it.”

Zolroth’s mouth tightens, and his eyes study mine as he sits down and sets his bowling shoes on the ground. “Don’t do that.”

“Why?” Ohhh, wait. Did he think it would undermine everything with William? Or maybe that William would think I liked Jason instead? Maybe William would think I was playing with guys, going on a date with Zolroth and flirting with Jason? Horror ziplines through me. Nope. Can’t happen. Note to self—no more admiring guys’ eyelashes. I write it inside my head and then underline it three times. “Nevermind,” I say. “I’m sorry.” I tack that last bit on because now that we’re right next to William, my back is tingling and my nerves are about to hit full force. The pressure is building, and I desperately need Zolroth to keep me focused so I don’t start spewing out random facts at five-hundred miles per hour like a fire hydrant.

My eyes grow wide when Zolroth gestures towards himself, making his legs wide. “Come here.”

I take a few steps forward, so that I’m standing just in front of his knees, but he grabs my arm and pulls me in the rest of the way so that I’m

trapped between his very muscular thighs. His piercing brown eyes stare up at me. And then he slowly reaches for the bowling shoes in my hand. “Here, let me put these on for you.”

My throat gets strangely dry, and the thought of him putting shoes on me makes me oddly self-conscious, but I’m not sure why. They’re just shoes. “Umm...”

Before I can protest, he grabs my right leg and scoops it up, placing it on his chest.

“Your suit!” I whisper in dismay, crossing my fingers that I didn’t step in anything. With the crazy, multicolored bowling carpet, you never can tell.

“Hush.” Zolroth is seated, and I’m staring down at him as he moves very slowly and deliberately. He puts my bowling shoes on the seat beside him and then brings both his hands up to caress the leg that’s planted on his chest. I look like an explorer claiming a new territory. Only, I’m not claiming him. New visual metaphor. I look like I belong in a shaving commercial... No that sucks. Maybe I look like a lap dancer! As soon as I think that, a huge blush takes over my face and I try to pull my foot away.

But Zolroth holds me firm. “Stay still. Do you know how amazing your ass looks in those jeans? We’re just gonna put on a little show.”

His compliment zings through me and bounces around like a happy little sparkler inside. But then the second part of his statement penetrates my brain. Show?

“What if I fall on my face?” I hiss.

“I’d never let that happen. You’re my girl.” The way his voice emphasizes the word “my” makes my nipples tighten. But I’m sure that was just the British accent. He didn’t mean it like *my* girl. He meant it like friends. Like *my girl*.

But for tonight, anyway, I do have to pretend to be his girlfriend. So instead of letting my brain get all fritzzy and overanalyze the intonation of every single syllable he says—I can do that with Stacy later—I just try to embrace the moment. I try to think of this as decathlon practice. Or one of the tournaments we go to in order to practice for state. This is practice.

Dating practice with a guy who won't storm out and leave me to walk home like that prick Daniel Valles, who took me mini-golfing sophomore year, then got angry because I wouldn't let him "get one in the hole" on a first date.

I blow out a deep breath and stare into Zolroth's eyes. I study them the same way I studied Jason's eyelashes. And I see the faintest hint of red behind the brown, which gives his eyes this crazy, almost caramel tinge to them. They're gorgeous. "Okay, I'm your girl." I'm surprised by how husky my voice has gotten.

I'm even more surprised by how tightly Zolroth grabs onto my calf. He squeezes for a second, saying, "That's right. And don't you forget it, love." Then he starts gently untying my shoe. He slides it off but holds my foot in his hand, his thumb stroking my arch—hard enough not to tickle, and it feels amazing—while he grabs my other shoe.

"So...tell me about yourself," I ask, because it's a typical first date question, but I'm also honestly curious.

"What do you want to know?" Zolroth asks in response.

Oh, he has no idea what a can of worms he's opening. I'm in academic decathlon. That basically means I want to know everything about everything.

"Why do you always wear suits?"

"Because they look good. Because I'm a materialism demon," he responds as his hands reach up to flick the gorgeous emeralds that dangle from my ears, "and part of my job is to show people that beautiful things aren't just wasteful, like some would have you believe. They make you feel beautiful, and that makes your soul incandescent. You're always beautiful, but right now, you're glowing, Kat."

His eyes look like they're drinking me in, and my breathing quickens. No one's ever said something like that to me.

Zolroth's expression changes from intense to naughty as he says, "I mean, look at you with that car earlier... I should have recorded that for my spank bank."

I giggle, which only makes my breasts, right at his eye level, bounce. I forgive him for his momentary distraction. In fact, his little intake of breath sends a wisp of heat up my spine.

He might be faking some things with me. But not all.

When his eyes travel back up my body, there's a smirk caught in his gaze, an extra sparkle. It's amazing, and I'm trapped staring. I feel like a wolf caught up in the moon's beauty, and I just want to howl.

"Brace yourself." He brings my hands to his shoulders, which are so thick and hard underneath that suit jacket.

I hold on as he slides the bowling shoe onto my foot, tying it quickly and efficiently.

To my surprise, he smacks my ass. "Done. Next foot."

I gasp, then laugh softly and roll my eyes, realizing that was just another part of the "show" we're giving. Sliding my foot down, I plant the second on his chest. I don't remove my hands.

"Is it working?" I lean down and whisper in Zolroth's ear. Is it wrong that I'm starting to like the idea of being on display? Of distracting William from his date? Of his eyes glued to my ass? The thought makes me feel powerful in a way I've never felt before.

"Oh yeah, they can't stop staring."

They? William *and* Janie are staring? That weirds me out, and I whip around only to see all the other demons have gathered behind us, standing between William's lane and mine. Kastros holds a pitcher of beer in one hand, cups limply in the other, but he's frozen, like he's forgotten about them. All of their eyes are tinged with red around the edges, and Raz's forehead even has the faintest shadows where horns might protrude.

What the fuck?

"You're blocking William's view!" For a second, I feel like running over to the crappy kitchen and grabbing a spatula and then running back and whacking each of them on the ass. But that image quickly gets out of

control, and my violent spanking vision morphs into something else. Something else that shall not be mentioned because it's a random flash of thought during a highly emotional state, and I can't be held responsible for my libido.

Right.

Yeah.

"Get away!" I growl at them.

They turn with a huff, and while most of them stomp over to their own bowling lane, Akor wanders off toward the arcade, probably to go shoot things and pour soda on the machines—

I don't know.

I turn back to Zolroth. "Can you believe them?"

He doesn't answer for a second. He's too busy staring at his hand, which has a tiny drop of blood on the tip of one finger.

I sit down next to him and reach for it. "Shoot! Are you okay? Was that my shoe?"

"Bowling shoe, I think," Zolroth says, studying his hand like it's a science experiment. "I think one of the metal grommets on the laces might be a bit sharp."

"I can grab you a bandage—"

"No!" His hand closes over my wrist, and he tugs me back down to my seat.

"What? Why?"

Zolroth's eyes study mine, and again, I see the red. This time, it flames out from the center and makes his eyes look like magma struggling to break through the surface.

That palpable tension between us grows again when I take his hand to inspect it. I avoid his intense eyes, because right now, I feel like doing something incredibly stupid. I feel like leaning up and kissing him.

But that would ruin everything.

Zolroth's just here to help me. He's here to help me and leave. He's so incredibly out of my league. I'd just embarrass myself. Besides, I want William, right?

Right?!?

Existential crisis here!

Still, I can't help tracing my fingers over his hand, inspecting the tiny cut there. It's fascinating how his skin is so soft but the bones are so big compared to mine and that he still feels so strong. His hand could probably almost wrap around my neck, and that thought is both terrifying and exciting. "I think you'll live. Are you sure you don't want a Band-Aid?"

He shakes his head. "No. Demons...aren't supposed to get hurt."

My eyes fly up to his. "What?"

"It's rare...almost impossible for us to get hurt."

I furrow my eyebrows, and he explains further, speaking slowly, almost hesitantly. "The only way we can really be hurt is...if we're close to our Center."

I lean in. "You mean that she-demon who attacked you the other night?" I hiss.

"What? No. A female demon didn't attack us. Some random guys did. Humans, I think, but they were gone before we turned around, so—"

"Well, what the hell is a Center?" I ask, burning with curiosity.

"It's...for lack of a better term, our mate," he returns, his eyes steadily holding mine.

I clench down on his injured finger without realizing it as blackness takes over my vision for a second. As soon as I recognize I might be hurting him, I release his hand. "Sor-sorry! Did I hurt you?"

On the outside, I'm all concern, but on the inside, I'm reeling. I'm full of a thousand and one questions about this.

Demons have mates? And what does he mean by “our?” Demons *share* mates? And this mate is close?

I’ll kill her.

Not a proportionate response, Katrina. There’s no reason to be murderous... yet.

My eyes scan the bowling alley suspiciously, searching for a stupid-ass demon woman who’s making Zolroth get hurt somehow. But I don’t see one. In fact, I don’t see Janie and William. Oh, wait. I spot them ordering a pizza at the counter.

I wonder if Janie’s the Center. She seems like a demon.

Zolroth starts chuckling, and I realize I just spoke aloud.

His hands wrap around mine and lift them. He places a gentle kiss on the back of my knuckles that makes my heart flop into a girlish faint.

“You’re cute. But Janie is definitely not our Center.”

My eyes flicker from Zolroth over to the other demons, who are glancing furtively in our direction whenever they aren’t bowling.

“Yes, *our*,” Zolroth answers my unspoken question.

So, they all share a single mate? Oh, poor demon woman. The guys are just trying to help me, and they wear me out with the constant attention, stalking, and ridiculousness. How much worse would it be for her? Still, though, we’re talking mates, and with demons, I’m guessing it’s not a stretch to call it a soulmate? I don’t really know.

I file that question away for later. I’ll start with something easier.

“But if this Center is your mate...why are you wasting your time with me?” I’m genuinely confused. “Who cares about a summoning spell when your mate is out there?”

Zolroth drops my hands and harshly shoves off his loafers before putting on the bowling shoes, aggressively tying them. “Most demons never want to find their Centers. Those that do...” He trails off and shakes his head.

Not want to find their mate? Pity, like a coin dropped in a lake, ripples through my stomach. What a sad existence. “Why not?”

“Because if a demon is near their Center, an angel can kill them.”



THIS FAKE FIRST date has suddenly gone from light-hearted to scary in a matter of minutes. I shoot up from my seat, fear for Zolroth taking the lead. “Well then, we’ve got to get you out of here.” I go to tug on his hand, but he just stands leisurely and captures my chin in his hand, turning my face back towards him.

He leans close, like he’s about to kiss me, and dammit all, my knees go weak. They definitely cannot tell the difference between a fake date and a real one.

Zolroth leans in close on my good side and whispers, “Stop panicking, love. The guys have my back. Just because an angel *could* kill me doesn’t mean they will. They’d have to get to me first. My team wouldn’t let that happen. We’re taking precautions.”

I want to argue, but he spins me in a slow circle and points me toward the rack lined with balls. “Now, choose your weapon.”

He releases me, and I stumble toward the bowling balls, mind still spinning with all of this new information. I know so little about them, about all of this, because I’ve been so focused on William.

But here they are, putting themselves in danger to help me.

Way to be an asshole, Kat, I scold.

Well, no more. I'm gonna do everything I can to find out all about Zolroth and the rest of the guys. And I'm gonna help them. Somehow. My puny, weak, human self is going to help. Maybe I can capture this demon woman and recite decathlon facts until I bore her to death.

Resolved, I grab the lightest ball I can find, because I don't want to remember this date as I'm rubbing my aching, non-existent muscles tomorrow.

"Blue ball? Not very nice, but very accurate," Zolroth says in my ear.

I nearly drop the ball onto my toe. Luckily, he has demon reflexes, and he catches it before my foot is smashed to smithereens and carries both our balls toward the lane.

He's somehow already programmed our names into the scoreboard on the little screen at the table. I peer down at it.

"SnuggleButt and CuteseyPoo?" I say sarcastically as I turn to him, raising an eyebrow. "And which one am I supposed to be?"

"Well, who's got the better ass?" He grins as he puts the balls into the return.

"Guess I'm up, CuteseyPoo." I laugh and grab my ball, nearly skipping to the lane. For all his regal persona, Zolroth's got a humorous side. It's fun to discover, and I wonder if it's a side he often lets others see. Part of me thinks it's not.

But then that part of me starts to get smug and gloaty and tosses a feather boa around her neck like she's special. I throat punch her.

Thoughts like that are going to make me forget this is a fake date. Which I cannot do.

I line myself up for a shot and swing my arm back just as Zolroth calls out, "Love your fingers touching my balls!"

Distracted, I totally biff my throw. I mean, embarrassing gutterball all the way down. I turn around and stomp back to Zolroth, who's shaking with laughter.

“Cheater!” I give him a little shove. It’s small and somewhat playful because a, let’s be honest, I was gonna gutterball anyway, and b, I can see Janie’s and William’s eyes drifting our way, and I want it to seem like Zolroth and I are having the most fun ever.

“Demon, love,” he says by way of explanation. “The difference between demons and angels? They’re so tied up in rules, they have to shit in a straight line or they get in trouble.”

“Yeah? But are you obligated to cheat?” I poke him in the chest.

“Well, lying, cheating, and stealing are kind of perks of the job.”

I narrow my eyes. “What will it take to get you to stop cheating?”

He lifts a shoulder. “I dunno. Maybe if you sat on my lap between each frame—”

“We can keep him from cheating.” Raz is suddenly standing right next to me.

I peer up at his dark eyes. His jaw is tight, but otherwise, his expression is as closed and unreadable as always.

Is he trying to be helpful? Or is he trying to horn in on my date? Besides, he’s *supposed* to be a teacher.

“Umm...”

The other guys are suddenly there, all their balls in their hands. Not *those* ones, their bowling balls.

“Our lane got shut down,” Raz says loudly, so William and Janie can hear. “Thanks so much for offering to share yours.”

I glance over at their lane, where somehow, suspiciously, the pin machine is malfunctioning, rising up and down and up and down repeatedly.

“Don’t tell me you just broke that!” I hiss.

“Fine. We won’t tell you.” Van saunters past me to put his shiny silver ball in the return. “Get her a beer, she looks like she could use one.”

“I’m underage. And you’re supposed to be a school counselor.”

“Yes. And I’m advising you to calm down. Here,” Van grabs a beer from the pitcher Kastros just hauled back over. He hands me the golden, frothy liquid, and I cringe at the smell. Do I drink? Sometimes (read, almost never). At parties (which I typically avoid). Not in public (this is very public).

“Um...”

“William’s drinking.” Van raises an eyebrow in challenge.

I glance over at William and Janie, and they do indeed have two cups of beer and they’re openly drinking them. I quickly take a gulp and set down my cup.

“No. Isn’t it a rite of passage to chug it?” Van asks, taking the seat next to me and casually tossing his arm up over the empty seatback on his other side. Damn him and his raw, amazing sex appeal. His words slither through my bones and whisper across my senses, and it feels like he’s dared my clit. She, unlike me, has a wild streak. She once got involved with a pager she found in a junk drawer. (Don’t ask. Seriously. Don’t.)

I chug the beer and wipe my mouth as the demons all cheer around me. Well, except Kastros, who gives a fist pump of appreciation before he sits down to add the rest of their names to our game.

I glance over in William’s direction, and he raises an eyebrow at me, like he’s asking, “What’s going on?”

I give a lost little shrug in return, and he gives a “that sucks” face. I nod in agreement, giddy that I’m actually having a cogent conversation with him. Okay fine. A gestured one. But still. Ticks and tacos have not come up once. Plus, he’s being sympathetic. Isn’t that so cute?

Ugh. This moment is totally going in the mental shrine.

That is, until Van pinches my ass and makes me shriek and jump like a lunatic.

I whirl around on him, and he gives me the most infuriating innocent expression.

“What the hell!” I speak through gritted teeth.

“You won’t make him jealous if you pay attention to him. The whole mystique is lost. Watch me.” Van glances over at some girls from school who have just emerged from an escape room.

He gives them a bored look before glancing back at me. “Now watch them.”

Immediately, they titter excitedly, and I can just imagine their conversation because it’s the same one I’ve had with Stace every time William has so much as looked in my direction.

“Yeah, well, not all of us were born with supermodel looks. I can’t just make guys fawn in two seconds flat.”

Van stands so that he’s next to me. Way, way too close. And for a second, I wonder if the beer I chugged is hitting me or if he’s using his lust power on me. Either way, I start to feel lightheaded. He leans down to my good ear and whispers, “Are you sure?”

I’m breathless. Frozen. My clit is screeching and doing a victory dance.

But Van just reaches around me and grabs his bowling ball, then saunters up to the lane like he’s completely unaware I just creamed my panties.

No big deal. He makes girls do it all the time, I tell myself. But that does not make me feel better. For some reason, I don’t like that Van does this to other girls. When he tosses his first ball and turns back to stare at me, he smirks.

“Shut up.” I turn away from him. “I don’t like you.”

He laughs.

Instead of dignifying that with another response, I move over to Zolroth, my real date for the evening. I sit down at his side and sigh with a strange sense of contentment when he wraps his arm around me. “Stop letting Van pick on me.”

“Van, leave the lady alone, or I’ll be forced to recruit a couple of furies to pluck your ballsack hair,” Zolroth threatens.

“Last time you tried that, they just ended up sucking my cock,” Van returns in a bored tone.

“Okay, fine. Gargoyles it is.”

Van’s eyes narrow.

Mine, on the other hand, widen. I turn to Zolroth and ask, “What are furies? And are gargoyles really...”

“Made of stone? Yeah. They don’t feel lust, which pisses Van right the fuck off. I’m not sure why I don’t invite them ’round more often. They’re both lower level demons. Carry out a lot of the functional administration for Hell.”

“Hell has an administration?”

Zolroth waves a hand leisurely as he tucks me in tighter under his arm. “To an extent. We have to track how many souls are swaying towards either side. That’s all a bit boring. Let me show you a dress I found for you online.”

I do *not* find the subject of swaying souls toward Hell boring, but clearly, he’s not interested in talking about it. And when Zolroth shows me the tiny wisp of a dress he’s picked out for me, my mind clears of anything else.

“Whoa. Yeah. I would look terrible in that.” I stare at a model who has legs for days, plastic breasts, and then at the world’s tiniest pink dress made out of zig-zagging material that leaves a ton of skin on display.

“No. You would be hotter than her.” His fingers trace my hip suggestively.

“In some parallel universe, maybe,” I respond sarcastically.

“No. You’re mistaking plastic for hot. Girls with their bodies full of plastic aren’t automatically hot.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“Hot is a state of being, not a look.” His fingers clamp down on my hip, and then his nose comes forward to nuzzle my neck. It traces over the sensitive skin and my pounding pulse.

Holy shit. I feel like I’ve stepped into an inferno. Desire burns through me. But at the same time, so does apprehension. Is he about to kiss me? I imagine what his lips will feel like on mine. Will they be soft? Will he be a gentle, polite kisser, or will he be an exhibitionist like he was with the shoes? Will he tilt me back in the seat, kissing my lips, only to trail down my neck and then nibble on my earlobe?

My breathing quickens, and I let out a nervous little giggle.

Zolroth pulls back from my neck. “There. That. That is hot. You’re nervous and worked up and giddy. And I made you that way.” He scoops me into his lap and grabs the back of my neck.

And for a second, everything around us disappears. I forget about the other demons, who are most definitely watching us. I forget about the bowling alley, and the sound of balls smacking pins fades away. I even forget about William and Janie as I stare at him.

I swallow hard, before smiling awkwardly and scrambling off his lap. “Damn. You sure you’re not a lust demon too?”

Zolroth and Van just laugh as I adjust my sweater and go sit down next to Kastros, feeling overheated and needing some distance.

Because what just happened was definitely not natural. I mean, not for me anyway. Rooms don’t just fade away.

That’s got to be demon magic. I blow out a breath. I’m not quite sure how to tell Zolroth not to do that to me without offending him.

But I don’t want magic. I want love. *Real* love.

Next to me, Kastros slides his beer over. I glance up at him, and he uses his head to gesture at the cup.

I take it and down it gratefully. As soon as I do, a wave of pleasant tipsiness washes over me. A wide grin stretches across my face, and I

elbow Kastros. “You and me, big guy. Who can bowl better backwards?”

Kastros looks down at me and grins for the first time. Damn. He’s hot. I’m normally overwhelmed by his size and his silence. But he’s totally got a rugged thing going on with his dark hair and eyes. He holds up a fist, and at first, all I can do is stare blankly at it. Until I realize he’s waiting for me to bump it.

I do. And my fist is so incredibly tiny compared to his. He’s so big that two of his fingers probably equate to most guys’ dicks. (So I’ve read. Shut up. Fine. Okay, so I’ve watched online. Happy?)

Kastros’s bowling name “Fluffy Bunny” pops up on the screen, and he slides out of the seat next to me. He grabs a pink bowling ball, because no one could ever question his masculinity—he radiates it like a damn lumberjack—and strides up to the lane.

Then he turns around and his eyes find mine. There’s this amazing playful glint in them that I’ve never seen before as he palms the ball in one hand (I told you his hands are enormous) and then lobs it backwards on one side. He doesn’t even turn to look, but the ball goes right up the lane, just off the center, and sweeps down every pin.

I jump up on the seat as Kastros does a little victory moonwalk. “No fucking way!”

He strides over and gestures for me to go next. I grab my bowling ball, grumbling about cheating demons as I do. I cannot throw the ball with one hand backwards like Mr. Giant-Showoff-Pants. I have to clutch the ball with both hands and bend forward, before I launch it between my legs like a toddler.

I turn, only to see it immediately gutterball. When I look back at the guys, blushing furiously, not one of them is looking at the ball. They’re all staring at me.

And then they start whooping and high-fiving.

“You’re throwing every ball backwards from now on,” Zolroth orders as I walk back to the group.

“What? Why?” I ask, sincerely confused. “That was awful.”

“No, it was epic. We got to see right down your shirt,” he states proudly.

I clap both of my hands over my face, which has turned cherry red.

Van, to my surprise, lessens my humiliation. “New rule. No normal throws.”

The guys all enthusiastically embrace this new rule, and I find myself constantly laughing as they waddle with the ball, lay down on their stomachs and roll it, kick one leg up and toss it underneath, spin and throw.

I get so into playing around with them that nearly an hour passes, and when I glance back over at William and Janie’s lane, I realize that they aren’t even there.

Oddly enough, I don’t feel that same sledgehammer of disappointment smashing my chest like it did when I first learned about their date.

I glance back at the demons and realize that, for all their faults, they do make pretty awesome friends.

But as I stare at them, I notice that Akor’s been in the arcade for a really long time. He’s missing out on all the fun. And the wild, crazy demon is, at his core, lonely. I don’t want him to be left out. So, I stand up and wander towards the arcade.

But I don’t see him amidst the flashing games. I bite my lip as I emerge from the room full of electronic jingles and scan the snack counter. Not there. I head to the front desk, where people can purchase shoes and lanes or escape room tickets. Maybe Jason will know where Akor is.

But when I get to the counter, Jason isn’t there either. They’ve both disappeared.

My stomach sinks. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.



“AKOR?” I call out tentatively, stepping outside.

I didn’t even realize that during our bowling shenanigans, the parking lot cleared out significantly. The biting November wind blows my pink hair around my face as I whip my head in both directions.

“Akor?” This time, my voice is louder, but only marginally. You never really know when a murderer is lurking behind a corner.

Or in this case, a pink-haired, eccentric demon.

Same thing.

“Akor!”

The distinct sound of muffled cursing reaches my ears, and I turn towards the honest-to-fuck minivan parked as far away from the lone street lamp as humanly possible. All I can see are vague silhouettes, barely visible in the glow of the crescent moon. But that voice? Muttering inane sayings such as, “Fuck me with a baseball bat. Fuck my unholy momma. Fuck your hairy asshole with a razor.”

That’s most definitely Akor.

I quicken my pace, unease automatically slithering down my spine like someone has dumped an ice cube down the back of my shirt. Not gonna lie

—there’s something immensely terrifying about crossing an abandoned parking lot in the middle of the fucking night.

I wonder if the other demons have even realized I left yet. Probably not, if I’m being honest with myself. They probably found a group of pretty girls to keep them company the moment I left.

My heart clenches at the prospect, but I shove those thoughts away like one would a pesky fly.

Not today, Satan. Not today.

Though...

I really have to rethink that whole Satan thing, don’t I? Does he actually exist? Is he the leader of Hell? Would that make him the guys’ boss? Their...daddy? Oh, fuck. Do they call him Daddy Lucifer and bend over for naughty spankings? Is that what’s going to happen if they don’t fulfill my wish? Is that—

“What the fuck?” I screech when I finally reach the minivan.

Akor spins towards me guiltily, arms raised like a prisoner approaching a police officer.

“I can explain,” he pleads, but I can barely look at him. No, my entire attention is fixated on the familiar man halfway inside the trunk.

The familiar, *dead* man.

Jason.

His wide, mossy green eyes are vacant and unseeing, and his head is canted to the side at an unnatural angle. Blood cakes his hair to his scalp, and I notice a few more streaks on his cheeks.

Jason. Is. Dead.

And Akor is currently shoving his corpse into the back of a *goddamn* minivan that has a bumper sticker that reads “Family 4 Life!”

“Kat, please,” Akor begs, taking a step closer to me. It’s only then that I notice the blood covering both of his hands. I don’t know why I hadn’t

noticed it before, but now, it's all I can see. That thick, red liquid stains his naturally pasty skin. I wonder if it stains his soul the same way?

I've caught him red-handed.

And it's not punny. Oh fucking hell, no, it's not funny at all. My heart has left my body and is currently hiding behind the light post on the far end of the parking lot.

"Get away from me." My voice is barely audible as I continue to back away. Step by step by step.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"It was an accident!"

"What the bloody hell is going on here?" Zolroth demands as he stalks forward, seemingly out of nowhere. "Oh...*fuck.*"

He grabs my waist immediately, his touch almost hesitant and unsure, but I shy away. I can't allow *any* of them to touch me right now. My skin suddenly doesn't feel like my own, too itchy, too thick, too... contaminated. Akor has fucking contaminated me.

I know my thoughts are turning illogical and incoherent, but I can't find it within me to give a damn.

A guy is *dead*.

And Akor can plead with me all he fucking wants to, but he still murdered him. Jason's blood is still staining his hands like a scarlet letter.

"What did you do?" Raz's voice is a guttural growl—more demon than human—when he materializes mere inches from me. I jump, startled, but he ignores me and strides towards the trembling, pink-haired demon.

"I didn't fucking mean to!" Akor shouts, pulling at the short blond sides of his hair, staining them red. Abruptly, he collapses to the ground, a strangled sound escaping his parted lips. "He fell. Hit his fucking head on the dumpster. I. Didn't. Mean. To!" The last words are a scream, a cry into the abyss, willing for someone to hear him. But instead of looking at his

leader, his gaze is focused solely on me. “I swear to you that it was an accident.”

“The dumpster, you say?” Van’s voice is as nonchalant as one would be when discussing the weather. Turning towards the lust demon, I watch him place a finger to his chin, tapping slightly. “Fuck, I think there are cameras over there.”

“Van, can you remove the footage? Kastros, I need you to clean up the site. Zolroth, you’re with me and Akor. We need to bring this body with us.” Raz spits out orders as fast as one of those automated baseball pitching machines.

“Wait, wait, wait! Hold on!” I’m borderline hysterical at the moment. Honestly, can you fucking blame me? Akor just *killed* a man, for fuck’s sake. “Shouldn’t we call, I dunno, the cops or something?” A deranged snort of laughter escapes me before I can rein it in, and then it just goes downhill from there. I don’t know if I want to scream, cry, or laugh hysterically, so instead, I do an awkward combination of all three. The final result is *probably* the equivalent of a parrot getting anally fucked by a hyena.

But, like, a girl can’t say for sure. (Fine. But “zootube” was an accidental typo, okay? Then curiosity won out. But my questionable internet history isn’t what’s important right now.)

“Van?” Raz raises a single eyebrow, and that one, eloquent look speaks paragraphs.

“On it.”

Before I can protest, before I can scream, Van is dragging me back in the direction of the bowling alley.

“What are we doing? Van? Van!” When he refuses to answer, beautiful lips pressed into a straight, stubborn line, I hiss, “Fuck you.”

Ignoring my tantrum, Van enters the building and bypasses the line until he’s standing directly in front of the counter.

Directly where I saw Jason only a few hours earlier.

Oh. My. God.

Tears prick my eyes instinctively, as they would when you mourn any life that was taken away too soon, but I remind myself to keep a level head.

You can't fall apart now, Katrina. Give it a few more minutes until you're alone. Then you can have a complete mental breakdown, m'kay?

The young woman now manning the counter blinks repeatedly up at Van. Her eyes glaze over, and her lips part slightly as crimson enters both of her cheeks. From her flustered reaction, there's no denying that she's thinking very, very dirty thoughts about *my* lust demon.

Fuck her.

And fuck Van too.

Hell, let's just fuck all of the demons.

"Hey, darling," Van coos in a voice capable of making most ladies cream their pants. I just saw the dead body of my classmate, and even I want to hump his leg like he's a one-cent horse at the grocery store.

This girl stands no fucking chance.

The pheromones Van emits are almost palpable, tasting bitter on my tongue. He exudes raw sex—the type of sex that demands you stand on a table, whip off your shirt, and then wave it above your head like a lasso. You want to get wild and lose yourself. You want to lose yourself in *him*.

"Can you do me a favor?" He flashes her a sultry smile, one I imagine he's used thousands of times before.

One that instantly causes my hackles to raise.

And then I remember...

Dead body.

Jason.

Minivan.

Family 4 Life!

It's official—I'm ten kinds of fucked up.

Less than two minutes later, we're in a quaint office with a single desk hosting two computer monitors.

The girl—Courtney with a C, as she announced herself—is practically plastered to Van's bicep. I can see her hips jerking forward as the bitch humps his leg.

And oh, I'm feeling stabby.

Which is horrible fucking timing, considering *there's a dead body in the back of Akor's soccer-mom minivan*.

Van, for his part, seems utterly oblivious to the girl clawing at his arm. His entire attention is fixated on the computer. As I watch, he rewinds the tape to when Jason first entered the parking lot, only fifteen minutes earlier.

On screen, Jason leans languidly back against the dumpster, a cigarette dangling from his lips. And there, seeming to appear out of thin air, is Akor, lips curled into a devious smile. No, not devious. *Malicious*. It's a smile that promises pain and suffering—a smile that embodies pure and unrelenting darkness.

The video doesn't have any sound, but I watch as Akor grabs the cigarette from Jason's mouth and throws it onto the ground, stomping it out with his boot. The demon stands mere inches away from Jason's face, his lips moving rapidly as he speaks.

A myriad of emotions cross Jason's face. First it's fear, but that fear quickly turns into annoyance and then something smug. There's a distinct smile curving up his lips as he says something to Akor that has the demon freezing, hands clenching into fists.

I watch in rapt fascination as Akor takes a deep, fortifying breath and steps away. Turns.

But then, Jason's hand is on Akor's shoulder, and the demon spins around so abruptly, Jason staggers back in shock. And to my complete and utter

horror, Akor shoves him, causing Jason to stumble and trip. He falls backward, attempting to shift sideways as he sinks. But the dumpster is too close. He whacks his head against the corner of the bin.

Blood.

So.

Much.

Blood.

I watch as a panicked Akor drops to his knees, attempting to staunch the heavy flow. And when that doesn't work, he places two fingers to Jason's pulse.

Van pauses the video abruptly, but I already know what will happen next—Akor will grab the body and carry it towards his van.

“You shouldn't have had to see that,” Van murmurs absently, *still* oblivious to the girl pawing at him. He removes the tape from the VCR and slides it gracefully into his jacket pocket. And then he grabs all of the other tapes from today and deposits them into his jacket as well.

As if we were never here to begin with.

A man's dead, and I'm helping them cover it up. My brain screams at me that it was an accident, that the cops wouldn't find Akor guilty of manslaughter, that there's no reason to steal evidence, but my body mechanically follows Van out of the room.

I'm dimly aware of the girl screaming her number to Van as he steps outside, holding the door open for me.

But I'm numb. Absolutely numb.

Jason's dead.

And the most fucked up thing? I'm more worried about Akor getting in trouble than the fact that one of my classmates was just killed by him.

I'm spending too much time with demons...because I can no longer tell wrong from right.



WHEN WE GET BACK out to the van, Jason's body has been neatly tucked inside and I don't see a hint of red anywhere, not even a stain on the asphalt.

My eyes scan, double-checking every inch of the ground as my mind hovers in some weird purgatory. I'm at a crossroads...unsure if I should go left and help with the demons' plan, or if I should go right and call the police.

But then Akor barrels into my side, wrapping his arms around me and wailing, "Forgive me, Katty. *Please*, forgive me. Don't hate me!"

The panic in his tone lets me know he's completely cracked, but so does the way Raz gently raises his hands and approaches slowly, like one would a wild animal.

I raise my hands gently and stroke his arms, speaking soothingly, like I do when Adam's upset. "I don't hate you." It's the truth. I don't. The other guys give me surprised looks, shocked that I'm comforting him, but I ignore them and focus solely on Akor. "But a guy is dead. And that's huge, Akor. You can't just undo that—"

"YES! That's it! We can." Akor releases his hard hold on me and grabs my hand instead, yanking me toward the van. "We can go back to our place and undo it all."

I glance over my shoulder, wide-eyed, at Raz, but he just nods and gestures towards the van like he thinks this is a good idea too.

Regret blooms in my chest like a golden dandelion, and I'm tempted to pluck it and peel off petals chanting, "This works out, this works out not." Because that seems as logical a way to predict the outcome of this shit as anything.

Can demons really undo death?

As the van starts up and I hurry to fasten my seatbelt, I realize that I'm about to find out.

We arrive at a townhome after a twenty-minute drive. And it looks like a normal brown, dull place built in the eighties, with those windows that are inset and never let in enough light. Not at all what I expected for a demon lair, but then, I just learned the most basic of facts about them tonight.

Kastros opens the garage door and parks inside. He shuts the door before we climb out, and I follow the guys in a daze through a mudroom with a very suburban-looking washer and dryer. Do demons do their own laundry?

It's not until we come to the living room that I see what I'm expecting. The floor sinks down thirty feet into a black rock cave. At the bottom of the cave, there are three red couches with curved arms—those definitely look like sex couches—arranged around what might be called a demonic fireplace. Only, there is no fireplace. A huge column of fire roars up from the black stone, not surrounded by brick or hemmed in by glass. It just dances upward, trapped by some kind of invisible magic.

I stand at the edge of the hallway and peer down at this hellish room, wondering how the hell people don't fall to their deaths just walking into this place, when suddenly someone scoops me up.

I find myself in Van's arms. I start to smile, but that smile turns into a shriek when he walks right over the edge and we tumble into the pit.

"Fuuuu—"

Black wings erupt from his back and catch the air, acting like a parachute. We glide slowly down to the rock floor, where I proceed to smack his shoulders for all I'm worth.

"You dickless bastard! You clumsy, evil, motherfucking—" I cut off my insults when the rest of the guys all swoop down around me and there's a plethora of leathery bat-like wings everywhere. And horns. Oh, the horns.

They aren't trying to look human down here. Raz has thick black horns that curve like a ram. Akor has white horns that are as delicate as a deer's and branch off just as wildly. Kastros's horns are pale blue and look more like dinosaur spikes than anything. Zolroth's horns are sleek and delicate, ivory-colored and tipped with gold. I glance back at Van's horns, which I hadn't really studied before. They're pink and have a swirl and are reminiscent of...dildos.

"Dickhead!" I giggle and point, taking a step backwards as Van frowns and swipes at me playfully.

"Don't start," he warns.

Zolroth grins and comes to swing an arm around me, an arm that I notice has black fingernails tipped with silver points. I snatch his hand from where it lolls in the air near my shoulder and examine his claws.

"These are amazing," I whisper, but I give a little shriek and drop his hand when the claws elongate into black blades and he turns into freaking Edward Scissorhands.

"Pretty useful for plucking angel wings," Zolroth says. "Or roasting hotdogs."

His mundane campfire cookout image for the gleaming weapons in front of me makes me giggle. Or maybe I'm overwhelmed. But a fit of chuckles takes over and won't stop until I'm bowled over and gasping for air.

Akor and Kastros shove aside a couch, and I realize that Raz has brought in Jason's body. He lays it down on the stone floor near the fire and then cuts his own wrist.

I gasp as his blood shoots onto the ground, but Raz doesn't even whimper as he uses his own blood to create a pentagram around Jason's corpse.

The guys each take up a spot at a corner of the star.

Raz licks his wound, and I watch in awe as it seals right back up. Then he points a black claw at me. "Stay back and stay silent."

I nod once, trying not to notice how dry my throat has gone.

I'm about to see a demonic ritual. What has happened to my life? This used to be the kind of thing I'd only ever see on TV after Adam went to bed. And now, I'm surrounded by nightmares.

Ok, fine, not nightmares. Not really. Not when I can laugh off their dildo-looking horns. Not when I can bowl with them for hours. Not when they're my friends.

First off...woah. When did I start considering them my friends and not stalkers? During bowling? Before that? Second, what does this mean exactly? Being friends with murderous demons? What has my life come to? I want to be scared of them, I honestly do—I know that I should—but I can't muster any of my original terror. Don't ask me why. Maybe Jason's death broke something fundamental inside of me...like my pesky sanity. There's no denying that they're dangerous creatures, but I have the distinct feeling that they'll never harm *me*. The other humans? I'm not too sure.

And when the fuck did I start calling them 'the other humans?'

When they start chanting in Latin, a chill goes up my spine, and I really wish that Stacy was here to shriek with me and hold my hand. But she's not. So I have to suffer with only a red velvet couch cushion, which I brutalize to the best of my ability, squishing and twisting it awkwardly.

Jason's body lifts into the air and floats above their heads. It spins slowly, and I can't take my eyes off of it. He spins faster and faster, like one of those merry-go-rounds at the park. Then all of a sudden, he stops and drops down onto his feet in the middle of the guys.

I gasp in surprise. *They actually did it.* I crane my neck, trying to see around their wings, make sure that Jason's alive and well.

Akor's the first to step aside, a wide, shit-eating, told-you-so grin on his face. "See? We fixed it!"

Jason is indeed standing in the middle of them on his own two feet. His eyes look a little wide and dumbfounded, but who wouldn't look that way if they suddenly came back to life in the middle of a cave-like room full of demons?

Jason spots me and bolts across the room toward me. I'm not sure if he's trying to protect me or wants to hide behind me. I don't have time to do much more than give off a surprised squeak before Jason grabs my shoulders and gives my face a long lick.

What the fuck?

He steps back and starts wiggling his butt as he says, "Hey, Katrina. Wanna play a game? Tag? Chase? Fetch? Wanna rub my belly?" He lays down on his back at my feet and starts to wiggle.

I glance up at the guys as I swipe Jason-slobber from my face. "What the fuck did you do to him?"

Raz scratches his head, looking more confused than grumpy for once. "He's a zombie. They normally come back a bit different. This is a bit extreme. But..."

"Reincarnation is tricky," Van offers by way of explanation.

"Reincarnation is tricky? Reincarnation is *tricky*? That's your goddamned explanation for stealing Jason's life and ruining it and then telling me you'll make it better and turning him into a dog?" My words go from zero to sixty miles per hour in four point two seconds, which is exactly how long it takes my heart to speed up into freak out mode. My hands turn into claws. I want to throttle and punch them and cry and scream and yell.

"Jason is dead!" Tears fill my eyes. My throat gets as clogged as Rapunzel's shower drain.

Jason gives up on the belly rubs and gets back up onto his feet. He looks normal as he walks through the room, but when he goes to sit down on the couch, he jumps onto it, spins three times, and then lays down with his ass in the air and his face resting on his hands.

“He can’t go to school like this,” I say dully. He’ll never get to go to college. Never get married.

I run a hand through my hair. And while I want to rage and scream, I know deep down that this was an accident. I saw the footage. Akor actually didn’t do more than any other high school guy would have if someone had grabbed them.

Jason’s death was an accident.

But it still hurts.

My eyes connect with Akor, and I can see the tortured look on his face. Is his pain demon power just as unconscious as Van’s lust power seems to be? Does it waft off of him like cologne, and instead of causing orgies it causes...tragedies?

My thoughts are interrupted by Van’s response to my last statement. “Oh, no, he definitely can’t go to school. He’d try to eat everyone’s brains,” Van tells me, as if this should be obvious.

My nervous giggle turns into hysterical, terrified laughter. “What? You let him come lick me! What if he’d bitten me?”

“We obviously wouldn’t let that happen.” Zolroth crosses his arms and tucks his wings in as he stares at me like I’m overreacting. But can he really blame me for being a wee bit dramatic?!

Jason lifts his head, pushing up to all fours on the couch. “I wouldn’t eat you, Kat. You’re my person. Even though your brain smells delicious.” His butt starts to waggle again when I make shocked eye contact.

“What are we gonna do?” I whisper. Jason’s parents are going to wonder about him, and everyone at school will be worried.

“Hey, now, none of that. We’ll take care of it,” Raz orders.

I glare at him, and rage just bursts out of me. He’s so damn arrogant. And wrong. He can’t even back that statement up. I take a step closer and waylay him with words. “Like you took care of bringing Jason back? Like you’re taking care of me and *my* summons? William left with Janie

tonight, and we didn't even notice! How *the fuck* is anything you do helpful? You're not taking care of anything!"

Raz's nostrils flare, but he doesn't respond, just stares down at me as I pant in fury. The only hint that he's even heard me is the red that flashes behind his eyes.

Akor snaps his fingers, distracting me from my standoff, when a chew toy appears in his hands. It's a bright red squiggly thing, and he squeaks it. Jason jumps off the couch and immediately lunges for the toy, snagging it in his teeth and growling playfully.

"We're taking great care of him. See? He'll be the most spoiled zombie ever."

I want to facepalm. I want to laugh. And I want to puke. Simultaneously. "I swear to God, I think you guys are trying to ruin every aspect of my life."

"Never, darling. That would counter the prime directive," Zolroth says as his wings disappear and he sprawls out lazily on one of the red couches.

"Which is?" I ask.

"To convince you that Hell is better than Heaven."

I laugh.

But when Raz and Kastros both turn disapproving looks on Zolroth, I realize that the posh demon is serious.

"Wait. What?"

"Why do you think a summons is so utterly important? Why do you think we can't just drop you like a sack of potatoes and leave?"

A strange, guttural growl erupts from Kastros when Zolroth says this, and the giant demon takes a threatening step toward the British one.

"It's because, with a summons, we have the opportunity to prove to you that human rules are arbitrary, structure is empty, that the straight and narrow path is meant to quash your spirit and leave you hollow. We're here

to convince you that the only beliefs that matter are those in here.” He taps his heart. “What does your heart believe, Kat?”

Damn him for taking my rant and turning it into this philosophical quest that’s somewhat fascinating. I fill up with a million questions, each battling for priority. I can’t even sort through my answer to his question because, honestly, right at this moment, my heart’s more tangled than a ball of yarn entrusted to a cat.

But Raz does what he does best—ruins the moment by giving orders. “She needs to get home.”

I laugh. “Seriously? Curfew? So much for ‘rules are arbitrary.’”

Raz glares at me. “No. I’m more worried about the fact that you left Adam with a babysitter, and I don’t want your brother to be all alone, because I don’t think you would want that.”

Oh.

Dammit. Why is everything the demons are saying right now sounding thoughtful? I must be tired.

Raz holds out a hand, and I automatically take it. The feel of his palm on mine gives me the strangest, most wonderful feeling of *déjà vu*. But, suddenly, I’m yanked backwards.

“I was her date for the evening, so I should be the one to return her.” Zolroth grips my shoulders hard.

“Look, after that attack on you and Akor, I’m not taking any chances—”

“It’s my job to return her—”

“And it’s *my* job to ensure all of you and Kat are safe.” Raz’s hand tightens around mine possessively, and he pulls me back towards him.

I stumble into his chest. Is it wrong that I take a moment to luxuriate in how muscular it is? Or that I take a mental snapshot of both of them fighting over me so that I can girlishly squeal later? Not that they’re fighting over me *like that*, but the fact that they’re arguing at all. Over me.

Oh, man. This means I should pull on my big girl pants and stop the fight, doesn't it? I take a deep breath and turn to Zolroth as Raz's body heat warms my back. "He's right," I say to Zolroth. "I don't want anyone to attack you." I bat my eyes prettily at my date. "If *he* gets hurt," I slide my gaze purposefully towards Raz, "no big deal."

The demons' laughter is the last thing I hear as Raz scoops me up and flies out of the room.



HAVE you ever driven in a van with a demon, staring in the rearview mirror at the backseat where your dead classmate—but now zombie dog—had once lain? No? Just me?

Goodie.

You know...I always wanted to be special, but this takes the fucking cake.

“Katrina...” Raz’s growly voice interrupts the tranquility we’ve established. Well, as tranquil as we can fucking be with a zombieified Jason at the demons’ townhouse, probably humping Akor’s leg and demanding tummy rubs from Kastros.

“Just drive, Raz.” I turn towards the passenger window and stare at the landscape rolling by. I can see the exact moment we emerge from the poverty-stricken section of town and into the wealthy one—derelict buildings covered in graffiti transform into modest-sized bungalows and farmhouses. And *those* buildings turn into sprawling mansions interspersed between fields of corn and the occasional forest.

When we turn onto my street, and the metal gates for my house appear in the distance, Raz slows the car to an idle crawl, almost as if he’s as reluctant as me to end things the way they are.

And how are things? Well, I don’t really know how to answer that.

I'm confused, for one, and fucking terrified for another. My mind is a toxic cocktail of emotions, and my stomach is knotted up tighter than a ball of yarn. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel, and for a girl who has lived her life in complete and utter control, that's terrifying. I sorta want to vomit right now. And cry. And rock back and forth in a ball.

And...

Well...

Would it be weird if I said I wanted to kiss the dem—

Nope. Nada. Not going there. Shut the front door and back out of the driveway, Kat. And then drive your dumb ass to Canada.

"You shouldn't have had to deal with that." Raz's knuckles are white from how fiercely he's gripping the steering wheel. A lone street lamp illuminates his short, sandy blond hair and his black tank top. At some point during the night, he removed his jacket, leaving his muscular forearms on display. I can vaguely see the angel wings tattooed on his upper chest.

Oh, the irony.

Side note—I wonder if he got that tattoo to be ironic? That would be kind of funny. But Raz and humor? One of those things is not like the other. One of those things just doesn't belong...

Just like I don't belong with a group of wild demons. Who kill people.

"Raz, it's fine," I whisper, tone unnaturally subdued. When he glances at me sharply, concern etched onto his handsome face, I work to conjure up a feeble smile. I'm sure I look like I'm taking a monster shit, but it's whatever.

"It's not fine," he snaps, whipping his head to once more stare out the windshield. His trademark scowl makes another appearance as he glares at seemingly nothing. "You saw a classmate get fucking murdered. I wanted to protect you from all of this." He looks as if he wants to say more—he actually opens and closes his mouth a few times—before compressing his lips into a stubborn line.

“It’s not your job to protect me,” I retort immediately as we stop at the gates leading to my house. Unsurprisingly, Raz knows the passcode to get in (I mean, the man and his demon entourage *did* break into my house numerous times).

As the metal spires slide open, I can’t help but note the ominous chill that slithers down my spine like a snake made of ice.

Why do I have the distinct feeling that something awful is about to happen? And no, I don’t mean the whole “becoming an accomplice to murder” thing.

“It’s my job—holy shit!” Raz slams on the brakes so fast, my head jerks forward.

“What...?” I squint my eyes at the two figures standing in the middle of the driveway, mere inches from the front of the car. “Holy mother of goats. Do they have a death wish?” The last words are said in a jumbled rush as I slide out of the car and stalk towards my parents.

Mommy Dearest has her arms crossed over her chest, wearing nothing but a satin robe over her nightgown. Dad is similarly dressed in his flannels and an untied blue robe. They look like the fucking *Night Before Christmas* come to life. Only, they aren’t here with milk and cookies.

“Mom? Dad? What are you doing—”

“Where the fuck were you?” Dad bellows, his eyes colder than I ever remember them being. “You had one fucking job to do, but apparently, you’re too damn selfish to help out your family.”

“I don’t—”

Dad cuts me off before I can finish. “Maybe your mother’s right. Maybe we should look into boarding school. You’re acting up, Katrina, and we don’t like it.”

Mom places a perfectly manicured hand to her heart. “How do you think I felt coming home to see that *stranger* with Adam? It was *your* night to watch him.”

Anger bubbles in my stomach, almost like when you pour a carbonated beverage into a cup. It's not overflowing yet, but you know that any second...

"What the fuck are we supposed to do with you? You leave your brother alone to go out with...*that!*" Dad waves his hand in disgust at Raz, who I can hear stepping up behind me. When his front presses against my back, I feel how taut his body is. How coiled. He's a fucking dragon waiting to be unleashed and set this world on fire.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I keep my voice low, a juxtaposition to their piercing screams. "Are you actually fucking with me right now?"

"Get your ass inside, Katrina!" my father roars, pointing a trembling finger towards the house. He levels a hate-filled gaze onto Raz, and for some reason, despite everything that just transpired, that pisses me off most of all. He has *no* reason to dislike Raz. None. "And *you*, stay the fuck away from my daughter!"

"Oh, so now I'm your daughter?" I release a mirthless laugh, tossing my hair back until my head rests on Raz's chest. "Pretty fucking convenient, don't you think?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mom sounds genuinely shocked...and maybe even a little hurt, though that could be wishful thinking.

"It means," Raz's deep, throaty voice tumbles through me, filling me with the warmth my parents stole from my body, "that you're shitty parents to both Katrina and Adam. It means that it's not your daughter's responsibility to be a mother to *your* fucking son."

"You watch your mouth—" Dad rages, but whatever look he sees on Raz's face has him clamping his mouth shut.

"For some reason, you two neglectful shits raised someone courageous, compassionate, smart, responsible, and fucking perfect. I can't even fucking hate you for that. But you have no right to talk to Katrina the way you just were. She worships the ground her brother walks on. She's a damn good sister, but she's an even better parent. You fucking remember who

takes care of Adam and Katrina every damn day, because it sure as shit isn't you."

Raz's is nearly shaking with fury, but his words...

His fucking words...

They destroy something inside of me.

That thing they destroy? I don't know what it is, but I do know that I didn't want it to begin with. It's like I've been living in a pitch-black room for years and only now are the walls crumbling. Ribbons of light filter through, and I feel oddly bereft, almost as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

My parents' mouths hang open as they gape in obvious disbelief. I wonder if anyone has ever talked to them this way. I imagine not. They walk through life as if their shits don't stink, but let me tell ya. I sometimes share a bathroom with those fuckers, and I'm pretty sure I need my nostrils sewn shut.

Abruptly, Raz grabs my shoulders and spins me around, planting a tender, chaste kiss on my forehead.

"Sweet dreams, baby girl." With a wink in my direction—and a scowl aimed at my parents—Raz saunters back to the minivan and backs it out of the driveway.

My parents are still staring at me in abject horror, so I do what any sane teenager would do when faced with her parents' inevitable wrath: I run like hell to my bedroom.

Pun intended.

They don't bother me as I get ready for bed, which is a shock. I can only imagine that they're drinking away their shock downstairs, badmouthing Raz and looking up boarding schools.

I don't worry too much about the boarding school thing though; I've looked into it myself, to see if there was anywhere that Adam and I could both go to get away. The price tags alone will deter my parents.

And if they don't... I allow myself a vicious grin as I imagine telling Kastros that I need a smidge of his vengeance.

And I'll do it too. There's no way I'm leaving Adam.

I climb into bed and realize that Zolroth is right, at least partially. Rules—my parents' rules—are stupid and arbitrary and deserve to be ignored.

I snuggle my pillow and gently chuckle as I recall how silly Zolroth looked tonight, bowling in a suit. He refused to take it off, which led to an enthusiastic round of chanting "Take it off! Take it off!" from the guys.

And then he'd given me a little lap dance as he'd shrugged his jacket off his shoulders before sliding his tie around my neck.

Good thing I'd had enough sense to take that shit off at the bowling alley. Lord only knows what my parents would have said if I'd come home wearing a tie. They probably would have threatened to lock me in the basement instead of sending me away.

I contemplate that for about a millisecond before reassuring myself that my demons are skilled at B&E and would have no problem getting me out of the house. Wait. Hold that thought. I have to check myself slightly.

I just mentally called them *my* demons.

Yeah...no. That can't happen. For a *variety* of reasons, the least of which is murder.

I fall asleep chastising myself because I can't get attached.

When I dream, I'm back in my beautiful cloud meadow. Only tonight, I'm in front of a gate I haven't seen before. It's not a pearly gate, thank goodness, or I'd rush in the other direction because there's no damn way Adam and I are going to be separated. Luckily, this gate is boring old wrought iron, not too unlike the gate at the front of my house.

I wonder briefly if my mind is intent on making me relive the worst part of my evening as I push the gate open.

But when I walk inside, I can see that's clearly not the case. I let out a relieved sigh as I glance around, a bit of awe swirling through my

stomach.

I'm in a small enclosed vineyard. But this vineyard isn't like any I've seen before. In true dreamscape fashion, the vines that climb trellises in this vineyard are pitch black, and the tip of each branch ends with an elegant spiral. The leaves are giant swathes of black that cascade down like elephant ears and hide bunches of fruit.

I walk down the first row of vines and peer closer to see what grows here. The grapes aren't red, but rainbow-colored little marbles, each perfectly spherical fruit a different color. Some are solid red. Some are white. Some have flecks of various colors that almost seem to swirl around them. I blink, at first wondering if the swirling is part of my imagination or if it's real.

I reach forward and pinch one of the tiny little fruits, surprised to find it's quite solid. It's smaller than my thumbnail, and I start to pull it—

“No! Don't!” Ziel's voice has me turning, but I've already got a solid grip on the little grape.

It rips from the stem.

And, suddenly, it grows. It becomes the size of my hand, then in a blink, the size of a beach ball. And it's so incredibly dense and heavy that I can hardly hold it.

Panic surges through me. What the hell have I done? “Ziel!” I cry out in shock as I realize that the surface of the grape isn't grape-like at all. It's covered in red dust.

He rushes forward—tonight, he's a handsome Indian man with a regal nose—but he can't reach me before the ball that I'm clutching is too heavy.

I drop it, and it immediately sinks beneath the clouds. I stare at the hole it has made in the cloud meadow, a hole that is much deeper and longer than the one I fell through. The clouds swirl around the opening, and the hole becomes filled with shadows as it descends, vaguely reminiscent of a wormhole.

As I glance back up, I realize that the entire front of my body, my hands and shirt, are covered in a light red dust.

I glance at Ziel. “What did I just do?”

He bites his lip. “I think you might have just offed a planet.”

My stomach drops through the same wormhole as the red sphere as my face becomes lava red and panic squeezes my heart. “Shit. Shit! Are you serious?”

Ziel just grabs my hand, ignoring the red dust. “Why don’t we just leave this garden behind? It’s clearly too tempting for you.”

I follow him, but my heart is tripping and face planting on repeat. Did I just kill an entire planet? Really? Truly? Was it inhabited? Oh, Lordy be, it better not have been. Nope. Nope. Cannot handle that.

“Relax. That garden only grows planets incapable of hosting life. It’s an original garden. The one with Earth and the other life-giving planets has a lock on the gate. For good reason.” Ziel adds that last bit under his breath, but I can still hear it.

I want to collapse in relief. I can’t even muster up resentment at his implication that I couldn’t resist the urge to touch things like a child. Or Eve. I’m so damn happy I did not just destroy the universe that my knees tremble. But then...I remember that this is a dream. That planet was just a figment of my imagination. Just like Ziel; *he* is just a dream.

Tears fill my eyes as I stare up at him. Why do dreams have to be so intense? Why do they have to scare me with the prospect of having the power to destroy the universe and tease me with the thought of a man so perfect that he’s impossible?

Ziel’s broad back and red cape are all I see as we walk back through the rows of tiny, growing planets. He’s still clasping my hand firmly as he opens the gate and leads me out. But he won’t make eye contact with me.

Do recurring dreams pick up where they left off?

Do phantoms of your mind remember their romantic confessions?

I see him glance quickly at me and then swallow hard as he looks back out over the cloudy hills.

I think he might remember.

My chest hums, and my face blooms with unguarded tenderness as I step over to him. His truth deserves a response. Because even if I can only ever love him here in the recesses of my mind, even if he's only a portion of myself that's raw and gentle, he's become so real to me that I can't help but see him as separate. And deserving. His quiet patience with all of my teenage drama, his sweet understanding as I've poured my heart out repeatedly, letting my feelings splash across his chest, as sticky and obnoxious to remove as grape juice stains. Ziel has listened to me rant about my parents and gnaw my nails off about college and the expectations that mount like a life-size Jenga that threatens to topple over on me.

He's taken care of me. Which is something that no one else, real or imaginary, has ever done. Well, until just now.

"Ziel, I love you." The words burst from my lips like a crappy magician popping out fake flowers. Immediately, I wish I could take them back and package them like fancy chocolates, say them better, make them sparkle like diamonds or something.

But they just hang in the air between us like fabric flowers that have been stuffed up my sleeve and are slightly damp with sweat.

Ziel turns back to me skeptically, dropping my hand. "You don't have to say that."

Great. I'm fucking up my confession to my dream guy. Maybe that's better than screwing up in real life, but for some reason, it feels worse. My heart twists when I realize he might think I'm being insincere.

"You're my best friend. My confidant. You're the only one who knows everything about me."

His eyes drill holes into me, and I notice that today, they're a gorgeous milk chocolate. When his expression softens slightly, I step forward and slide my hand back into his. "I do love you, I really do. If this was real, if you were real, you'd be my perfect guy. But this is all a dream."

He cocks his head to the side, frowning slightly. “And that means it’s not real? What if we’re in another dimension? Or an alternate reality?”

I shake my head and laugh. “Okay, I definitely know that’s coming from the science cards I studied for decathlon. Dreams are *not* real. Thank goodness they aren’t, or I’d really have messed up an entire planet, maybe even a universe somewhere tonight! I’d be puking with guilt.”

Ziel studies me for a long minute before he says, “You always come here for a reason. You always have something to tell me.” He tugs my hand and begins walking up a soft, slightly springy cloud hill. “Tell me,” he orders, in his low, gravelly *Witcher* voice.

“My parents are threatening me. But the weird thing is that I’m not as intimidated as I’d normally be.”

“Oh. Why?” he asks as we crest the hill, and I can see our familiar little cloud garden ahead.

“I’ve got these...friends now. And they’ve got my back. They’re a little crazy, but mostly good-hearted, I think.”

“You think?” Ziel stops walking and turns to give me his full attention. His gaze warms me like the sun when he asks, “Why aren’t you sure they’re good-hearted?”

I contort my face like a ventriloquist and try to talk through my teeth, because as much as I always tell Ziel everything, I can already guess how he’s going to react to this news. “It’s the demons you warned me to stay away from.” I speak so quickly that the words blend into milkshake-like mush.

“What?”

I repeat myself slowly, avoiding eye contact.

Ziel doesn’t respond, and so eventually, I’m forced to cringe and send an eye upward to scout out his emotional location.

He’s not pissed. To my shock, a slight smile is tugging at the corners of his lips.

“So, you defied your parents. You defied me. And now you’ve got yourself a gang of demons at your beck and call.”

“They aren’t a gang!” I jump in to defend them. “More like a brigade? Squad? I don’t know the word for it.”

“And I bet they’re doing their best to ‘help’ you.” Ziel shakes his head. “You should be leery of demon help.”

“What? Why?”

“Because, at their cores, demons are very selfish creatures. What they want matters more than anything else.”

“That’s not true!” I argue. “They brought a guy back to life for me. Because I wanted it.”

Ziel steps in so that his feet touch mine. His massive armored chest is right at my nose. His hand reaches down under my chin and draws my gaze up, up, like I’m climbing a mountain. At the crest, his face is a view that takes my breath away.

But his face is dark as he says, “If they did what you wanted, you know the reason for that.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t.”

Ziel leans down until his face nearly touches mine. I can feel the vibration of his words against my cheeks as he snarls, “They want *you*.”

I think he meant to scare me. But instead of a shiver of fear coursing through me, a tendril of flame lights me up inside. And with a shaky voice, I say, “I might want them too.”

Ziel’s mouth opens to retort, but suddenly, I’m ripped out of the cloud meadow. I zoom through the darkness, and gasping, I find myself awake in my room with an arm on me. I jerk to the side only to realize that it’s Adam, standing next to my bed.

“Katty? Can I sleep with you?” he asks. “There was a monster in my dream.” His eyes are soft with unshed tears.

I toss open the covers and help him climb in. “Of course, big man. I’ll protect you.” I kiss the top of his head as he drifts back to sleep. “I’ll always protect you.”



STACY FINDS me at my locker first thing Monday morning. “OMG. Guess what happened?”

Since she runs in much more popular circles than me half of the time, and since I’ve been on parental lockdown the entire weekend after my parents caught Raz bringing me home, I have literally zero clue what she’s talking about.

My bag is at my feet, only half loaded for the full morning run I have to do, since my locker is too far away for me to stop by until lunchtime. I turn, my Calculus textbook weighing down my hand, and notice that her blonde bangs look particularly good today with her cat eyeliner.

She doesn’t immediately spit out the information, but she’s bouncing on her toes. I can tell she’s trying to build up the suspense. She kind of looks like Adam whenever he asks me to guess what he wants for his birthday. He gets so worked up with excitement that he can hardly wait to tell me.

Did she do the deed with David?

I kind of assumed they already had. But whatever. Or is this about the winter dance?

She’s pressing her lips together and not completely deliriously giddy, so I assume not. I ask, “What?”

“Mr. D got *mugged*,” she shrieks. But hers is more of a teenage shriek of delight to have gotten the first, freshest gossip.

I gasp. But my gasp is riddled with pain because it suddenly feels like there are holes in my chest. I literally have to put down my book and put a hand over my heart to ensure it’s still beating. Raz is hurt? And nobody told me?

When did that happen? How? Did it happen after he dropped me off? A horror movie montage starts to play out of my dad paying someone to hurt him. I know my parents have money.

Stacy’s still blathering on, saying something like, “He doesn’t even look like himself—”

But I’m not listening.

I turn, abandoning my bookbag, leaving my locker wide open. I use my Calculus book as nature always intended—as a weapon to whack the idiots crowding the hallway.

Then I sprint to the gym.

Note—I don’t run. Like ever. So when I reach the gym, I’m a sweaty, panting mess, but I yank open the metal door and rush inside, dropping the calculus book with a thud that echoes when I see Raz’s face.

It looks like hamburger meat. It looks like someone beat and clawed him to a pulp.

Oh God, no. *No*. I feel like I’m standing in a rainstorm, and suddenly, all the raindrops have turned into rocks. And the rocks are sharp and pelt down, pummeling right through my skin, ripping it away. Seeing him hurt literally hurts me. My entire body aches as though I feel echoes of his pain.

“Raz,” I whisper, forlorn.

I can hardly see those beautiful, furious eyes of his as he stomps over to me. “What are you doing in here, *Ms. Colt*?”

I reach automatically for his face, but he shoves my hand down.

“You’re my student, remember?” he growls.

I ignore his very obvious reminder. His stupid front doesn’t matter right now. “What happened?”

“None of your business. Now get to class.”

His dismissal hurts, but in a different way. It’s not like seeing him suffer. Whereas seeing him hurt feels like a million minor cuts, hearing him dismiss me feels like he’s just reached inside my chest and squeezed my heart until it burst like a water balloon in his hand. It’s far worse.

It takes me a minute to recover from that. And I can’t stop the tears that gather in my eyes. Because maybe I do deserve his scorn and rejection, maybe this is all my fault. “Was it my dad?” The word comes out shaky and hesitant, and immediately, I put a hand on the wall and stare at the floor, panting, bracing myself for his answer.

If it was my dad’s doing...I can’t go home.

Raz answers in a growl so low I can hardly hear, because he’s standing on my bad side. I have to look up and read his lips a little in order to understand. “You think your dad is any kind of a threat to me?” Raz tilts his mutilated face up toward the ceiling and laughs unpleasantly. “Baby girl, I’m a thing of nightmares.”



RAZ WOULDN’T SAY ANOTHER DAMN WORD. NOT ONE. THE WARNING BELL rang and students started showing up, but still, I deserved a damn explanation. I deserved to know what was going on.

Because I like—no, because I *care* about these idiot demons. As friends. I spent all day yesterday rationalizing away my stupid dream self who’s so obsessed with love, she can’t tell the difference between demon pals and lovers. Clearly, I’m not that important to him. Clearly, we aren’t to the level of sharing things yet.

See? I tell my heart. *William’s the far better choice.* He wouldn’t shove me away if I was just being concerned like a decent human being.

I stomp back to my locker, certain I'm going to be late for my next damn class and furious about it.

As I walk through the halls, I see David, Stacy's boyfriend, talking with a few of the guys from decathlon. David's such a nice guy. Doesn't really care about the stupid social hierarchy. Unlike some people. Who are gym teachers.

I'm still seething that he wouldn't tell me what happened. These assholes butt into every aspect of my life, but when I show the tiniest bit of concern for theirs, this is what happens?

I get the brush off. And not just the little lint brush, I get the push broom of brush offs. "Fucker," I mutter under my breath.

"Hey, Katrina!" David notices me and fist bumps my study buddy, Tim, before striding over. "Guess what happened!"

"Mr. D got mugged," I parrot glumly, not ready to make eye contact with him. He's too much of an enthusiastic guy and makes me feel like Eeyore in comparison. But I want to be Eeyore. I want to pout just as much as I did when I found out William had a date.

Maybe more.

Nope. Scratch that.

No more pity for the asshole. If he got himself kicked in the teeth, then he probably deserved it.

I try to hold on to that thought as I look up at David, who's patiently waiting for me to pay attention to him. Damn. I'm an asshole.

"Sorry. Bad morning. Did I ruin yours by already knowing about Mr. D?"

"Nope. Cause I just heard that Jason Brett got recruited to a modeling agency."

"What?" My jaw literally drops. Which of those idiots came up with that lie?

“Dude. He got discovered on the street, and supposedly, they flew him out to Los Angeles.”

I shake my head. “Impossible.”

“I know, right?” David shakes his head, eyes still on me. “Hard to believe.”

“Totally hard.”

“I mean, what are the chances?”

I don’t respond because I see my backpack in the distance. At first, I’m surprised to see it there on the floor, undisturbed. I thought for sure that it would get stolen. Or maybe messed with, but then I realize Akor is sitting on the windowsill across from it, wearing a leather jacket and an earring that dangles, cleaning his nails with a switchblade.

And there it is. Demon interference for the win.

Ugh.

Knowing them is such a double-edged sword. Bad and good. Good and bad. It keeps spinning like a quarter caught midair.

I release a huge sigh. “David, I’m gonna be late to class. That’s really cool about Jason though.” I have to force the next words out while I try not to picture what Jason actually might be doing now—lapping water from a dish on the floor. “I’m...happy for him.”

David laughs. “Yeah. Right. It’s okay to say you’re jealous like the rest of us, Kat.”

I shrug, letting him think what he wants to think. He waves and heads off, which is probably a good idea, considering Akor is glaring at him. I grab my books, minus Calculus, and fill my bag, waiting for Akor to speak.

“I came to check on you, Katty. You didn’t come out to play yesterday.”

I roll my eyes as I heave my huge bag onto my back. “I was grounded. And how the hell did you get in here? You didn’t enroll too, did you?”

“They won’t let me. They say I have to babysit the zombie.” Akor pouts with a frown that’s so adorable, I strangely want to pinch his cheeks.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I had to double-check that you’re not mad-mad at me,” he explains with a shrug, hopping down from his perch and striding over to me. He lifts his hand, and the back of his fingers slide down over my cheek. “Say you’re not mad. Please.”

Why does the drag of his fingers light me up brighter than a spotlight? I shove aside that reaction as I say, “I told you I wasn’t the other night. But if you aren’t at home, I’m pretty sure your new ‘friend’ is gonna pee and shit everywhere.”

Akor claps his hands together and takes a step backward. “Right. Crap. Okay. I gotta go. But we’re good and I’ll see you later, ‘kay?”

I nod as the bell rings, officially signaling how late I am to the world. I turn with a sigh, ready to tromp to the office and request a late slip, when I see Janie St. James leaning against a locker, studying me through slitted eyes.

“Who was that?” she asks, jerking her chin at Akor’s retreating back.

I shrug. “A guy I know.” I highly resent the way that she makes our school uniforms look like schoolgirl porno outfits. Mostly because I know I don’t.

“Zolroth will find this interesting.”

Ohhhh. She thinks I’m a cheater. I level her with a confident, sultry gaze that is the opposite of my usual persona. “He knows.”

And then, I leave stupid Janie St. James with her mouth gaping open, a thrill flitting up my spine as I turn the corner and walk away.

Damn. I have to try so damn hard not to fist pump or ruin my badass, intrigue, naughty bitch status with a shoulder shimmy. But it proves too hard. I’m about to ruin it. I know I am. But then I see the counselor’s door straight ahead.

Sanctuary.

And maybe...possibly...answers about Raz.

I duck inside, only to see two senior girls who I personally know are dating soccer jocks. They're making out right in the middle of the counselor's office.

"Really?" I shove them apart in disgust and walk over to Van's office. His door is open, with the perfect line of sight towards the two girls going at it, but he's not even looking. He's playing *Sims* on his computer.

I shut his door and sling my bag down to my feet, then walk over to stand beside him, where the blinds are letting little stripes of yellow light line his back like he's a prisoner. *Aren't we all in this place?* I think wryly.

"Why do you even make them do that when you don't even seem to care?" I ask him.

"Who do what now?" he asks, finally tearing his eyes away from the coffee shop he's currently running. His character has a little apron and everything.

"Those girls." I gesture toward the door with a disapproving shake of my head. "They both have boyfriends, you know."

He sighs and leans back in his chair. "I can't help it. The power just wafts off of me like cologne or something. Trust me. It's just as obnoxious for me as it is for you. Maybe even more so."

"Really?" I raise a skeptical eyebrow. "Two hot girls making out is obnoxious?"

That makes Van swivel in his chair. "Yeah, it is. All I do is emit pheromones. Nothing else. And yet, people are willing to throw their partners to the side to get hot and heavy. It's disheartening. I mean, really, it shows how love is just a cheap façade."

I recoil. "You can't actually mean that!"

Seeing his beautiful face drop, the way he bites his lip and shakes his head, makes my heart deflate. He *does* mean it. What a horribly sad existence. I search for any little snippet of hope. "But...but you like rom-coms!"

“‘Cause I wish they were real. I wish romance was real and lust... sometimes, I wish it wasn't.” His wistfulness drifts up to me like a child's balloon caught in the wind, one second bright and bobbing, the next second caught by a gale and ripped away.

And in that way, Van and I aren't so different. He wishes that sweet, pure as honey love is real. I still believe it is—the kind of love that can sweeten life's little moments and put a smile on your face. The kind of love that I think I see from couples who are ninety and sit on their front porch, rocking in their rocking chairs, hands clasped. That's what the neighbor Mrs. Johnson and her husband used to be like, once upon a time.

I sigh. “Me too.”

I don't know of a way to convince Van that he's wrong about love, not yet anyway. Because even after I've pined for William for years, I can't say the hot-as-sin demon hasn't turned my head. Not that I'd ever do anything. I haven't done anything. Won't do anything. (Don't look at me like that. I *won't*.)

Part of me wants to point out my own self-control. But another part of me doesn't want to start an argument with him, not when I need to know what happened to Raz.

So instead of waxing poetic about love, I lick my dry lips and go take a seat across from him. I place my arms on the armrests and straighten my spine, keeping my feet planted as I lean forward in one of the power poses I've seen my mom use in negotiations.

“What happened to Raz?” I ask.

Van's temperament immediately shifts gears. He goes from longing to dark in point-zero-zero-two seconds. “He got hurt.”

“By whom?”

Van lifts a solitary shoulder before running a hand through his auburn hair.

I smack my hand on his desk, frustrated. “That's not fair. Don't fucking hide shit from me. Is it that she-demon? Or is it someone else?”

“She-demon?”

“That fucking Center you guys talk about. I swear to God, I’ll rip her to pieces—”

Van bursts into laughter. “Our Centers can’t attack us.”

I sit back in my seat, losing the power posture as I slump in confusion. “Then whom? Someone is targeting you guys. Zolroth and Akor were attacked. Now Raz.”

Van shakes his head. “Violence is far more common than you think, little Kat.”

I lean forward, grab a pen from his desk, and throw it at him. “Is it?” I shake my head, because I know, I just know, that he’s wrong. “It’s not a coincidence.”

“Really?” His skepticism and the pen he launches back at me are not appreciated.

After I duck, I lash out, “I’m serious! Someone’s after you all. Seeing what they did to him... Someone tried to kill him!”

Van just stares at me for a moment. “Why do you think that?”

I shake my head. “Didn’t you see him?”

“Yeah, but you. Why do you think that it wasn’t just a random mugging, like he said? Why don’t you believe him?”

I wring my hands in front of my chest. “I don’t know.” I honestly don’t. There’s just this awful, niggling sense of danger looming over me. “I just...feel it.”

Van nods and pulls an orange slip of paper out of his desk. “Miss Colt, you better run along to class now. I know you’re worried those college—”

“What?”

Van points toward the door, and I see the principal approaching, his bald pate reflecting the morning sunlight.

Dammit. I snatch up my bag and the note and point a warning finger at Van. “This conversation is not over.”

He nods and smiles falsely. “Of course. The college decision making process can be so hard. I’m here to talk whenever you need.”

I need to throw another pen at him. But I don’t get to. Instead, I get to mosey on, late to math class, and explain that I forgot my freaking textbook. Best day ever.



THE ENERGY in the room is almost palpable—and most definitely infectious—as I slide into my usual decathlon seat beside Wade.

“What’s going on?” I whisper, and he slides me a droll, *are you kidding me?* type of look.

“Out-of-state tournament,” he replies back blandly and somewhat reluctantly. He gives me a barely veiled look of disgust before crossing his arms over his chest and reclining back in the uncomfortable plastic chair. “Apparently, we’re getting fancy hotel rooms and everything.”

An out-of-state decathlon tournament? Why does that prospect fill me with both dread and excitement? On one hand...vacation. Enough said. On the other, I can’t possibly consider leaving Adam, can I? How will he get to daycare? Who will watch him at night? Who will tuck him into bed? Who will—

I can feel an impending panic attack coming on, but I work to regulate my breathing before it can spiral out of control.

Now is *not* the time to go full-on mental ward. The students here are freaking vultures, and they’ll descend on my meaty flesh at the first sign of weakness.

“Maybe they’ll make a mistake with the reservations and I’ll have to room with Mr. Kastros.” Janie’s snotty voice pulls me out of my internal freak-out-slash-meltdown. She saunters past me with Molly on one side of her

and Ashlee on the other. Both girls titter as Janie tosses back her shiny blonde hair.

“You’re so bad, Janie.” Molly giggles.

“So, so bad,” adds Ashlee.

So, so, so bad, I mentally supply, allowing my imaginary self to do a hair flip as well. And imaginary me? She’s just as adept at it as Janie is.

Though...

Isn’t Janie dating William currently? Or did something happen? The last I heard—through the rumor mill—they had another date after their bowling alley one. Did they break up? Before, I would’ve been overjoyed at the prospect. But now? I...don’t care. I mean, I do care, obviously, but in a detached sort of way. The previous elation that would once have been bubbling inside of me like a kettle on a stovetop is nowhere to be seen.

What does this mean? Do I no longer have a crush on William?

I can feel myself beginning to panic, beginning to unravel, because loving William Washington is all I have ever known.

Where are you, love nugget? Come out, come out, wherever you are.

Before I can pound it into submission—that fucking love nugget, I mean, not William—Kastros enters the classroom, his shirt sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscular, enticing forearms.

Immediately, that elusive love nugget makes an impromptu appearance, and I practically sag in relief.

There you are, little bastard. Why didn’t you come out earlier?

I mentally do a choreographed dance and cheer that my feelings haven’t completely changed. I still love William. I mean, I’m assuming the love nugget is for him. Who else could it possibly be for? The demons? Ziel, a guy who doesn’t even fucking exist?

Snort.

That’s laughable.

Kastros, ignoring the excited murmurings of my classmates, turns towards the whiteboard and writes in elegant scrawl, *Tournament in Illinois. Three weekends from now. Space is limited, so we will have try-outs this afternoon, which will have two parts. An improvisational speech and a super quiz.*

Almost instantaneously, the enthusiastic whispers turn into disgruntled huffs. Janie looks particularly pissed, her scrawny arms crossed over her chest and pouty red lips pursed. I can't help but smile smugly, because ha! If she thought she could share a room with my demon, then—

Woah. Calm your tits, Katrina. He's not your demon, and this isn't Janie's imaginary world where fate will place them in a room together and they'll stare into each other's eyes...

Fuck Janie!

I'm stunned by the direction of my thoughts and the almost vehement vow I make that says Janie won't lay a manicured finger on any of the demons. I have to tell myself repeatedly that they're not mine. They haven't ever been mine. Apparently, they belong to some bitch named Center or something. Well, fuck her too. It's a stupid name.

Kastros removes a sheet of paper from his briefcase—literally, the man carries this giant ass briefcase into the class, but the only thing present inside is that lone slip of paper—and tapes it to the wall. I can distinctly read *SIGN UPS* written in all capital letters and underlined three times.

Immediately, the students converge on the damn paper like pigeons flocking to a chunk of bread in the park. Janie all but elbows her way to the front of the line, tossing back her silky blonde hair like a weapon, and begins to write her name on the list. Abruptly, she pauses, brows furrowing together.

“Why is Katrina already on the list? She didn't sign up!” she huffs, tossing her head in my direction to level me with a penetrating glare. I shrink further into my seat.

“Um...” I glance wide-eyed at Kastros, who stares at Janie as if she's a bug under his shoe. In all honesty, I kind of want Janie to be put into a

room with Kastros. I have a feeling he'll eat her skinny ass for breakfast. And not in the hot way.

Too much?

"That's so not fair," Janie screeches, her shrill voice causing both Tim and Wade to cover their ears. Even Molly—her bestie—looks slightly wary as she tentatively pats Janie's shoulder like one would a dog.

When it becomes apparent that no one is going to jump to her defense, she scribbles her name down, glares in my direction, and stomps back to her seat near the back of the classroom. Literally stomps, as if in her demented mind, she believes she's a giant and I'm poor Jack trying to climb the beanstalk. But in this story, Jack ends up crushed beneath her stiletto and begging for mercy.

"Kastros," I hiss through gritted teeth, and Darrel, who is still sitting beside me, jumps slightly at my tone of voice. I can be a scary motherfucker when I want to be. Hear me roar. Actually, don't. I'm pretty sure I'll sound like a hairless cat. Though, now that I'm thinking about it, hairless cats sound just like normal cats. Maybe I'll sound like a cat who's secretly part goat? A mutant cat? A mutant ninja cat?

Kastros rolls his eyes but complies, crooking his finger in a come-hither gesture. I jump to my feet and follow him out of the classroom into the hall, ignoring the eyes I can feel burning a hole into my back. I'm pretty sure Janie believes she has laser-vision with how hard she's glaring at me.

When we're far enough away as to not be overheard, I whirl on Kastros, vitriol spewing from my eyes.

"What the hell was that?" I demand, throwing my hands up into the air.

He grunts, rolling his eyes, but I refuse to let him dismiss it this easily.

"Seriously, Kastros, what was that? Why did you sign me up?" The anger drains from me quicker than water down a sink as my body physically deflates. "You know that I'm not able to do that type of shit. An overnight stay? In a different state?" I scoff once, and this time, the anger bleeding from my voice is directed solely at my parents. "I can't leave Adam alone for that long."

The demon's eyes harden, resembling chips of obsidian, as he begins to sign. Unlike last time at my house, it isn't demonic sign language or whatever the hell you call it. It's regular ASL, and though I'm rusty, I'm able to piece together what he's saying fairly easily.

You deserve this.

"Kastros, no."

He continues signing before I can finish my thought. *You do, Katrina. You deserve this and so much more. Why do you constantly hold yourself back when you deserve the world? I don't think it's Adam stopping you from going.*

"You don't know what you're—"

I think it's fear, he continues on, his scowl deepening.

I want to tell him that his face will get stuck like that, but it's pretty damn sexy either way.

I think you're afraid, he signs.

"Of leaving Adam alone with my 'rents? You're damn right I am."

Of becoming your own person. I think you're constantly afraid that you'll let people down, no matter what you do or accomplish. I think those shits you call parents really did a number on you. With every word he signs, he appears to become more animated. His scowl doesn't lessen, but his eyes become...well...dare I say, warmer? *I signed you up because you're damn good at this, Kat, and I can see how much you love it. I know you're too selfless to sign yourself up. You deserve this. You deserve it all.*

The sincerity in his eyes, the pure and undiluted belief he has in me, is almost too much. My throat closes as emotions sweep over me like a tsunami wreaking havoc on the shore.

"But Adam..."

Trust me, Kat, he signs, eyes imploring my own. *We care about him too. But this isn't about him. This is about you and what you want. So tell me, little demon, what do you want?*

You. The thought springs to me unbidden, but I shush my internal voice instantly.

I allow myself to think through what I actually want. Not what I need to do. Not what my parents expect me to do. Not what society dictates I have to do. But what *I* want to do.

And what I want to do is compete in this tournament.

My acquiescence must be plain to see on my face, for Kastros's lips twitch. He nods once, steps into my airspace, and plants a tender kiss on my forehead. The heat his large, muscular body emits is almost palpable, and I feel so incredibly little and small with him looming over me. But also safe and cherished and protected. And loved. And cared for. And—

Uh oh.

It will really, really suck if I started developing a crush on my demon friends, now wouldn't it?

Because sooner or later, they're going to fulfill their end of the bargain and go home to "Center," that bitch. And I'm going to be left with a shattered heart and no one around to help me pick up the pieces.



THE PROBLEM with competitions is that you have to put up or shut up. I'm typically more of a shut up kind of girl.

But Janie's taken out the big guns, literally. She's stripped off her school shirt and is wearing only a very thin white tank top when Kastros and I return, her push-up bra her main weapon.

Fucking great.

I can see that Wade and Tim's eyes are already glazed; they'll gladly give up their seats for her, I'm sure.

I shake my head as I walk back to my seat. Tournaments usually allow nine people to compete, but since this is going to be an expensive, out-of-state tournament, we only get seven. Those seven have to be the best, because every single score will count. I've always come up with some kind of excuse—dental work, parents out of town—to get out of having to compete for a spot.

Not this time.

I'm just about to close my eyes and psych myself up for speeches, when in walks William Washington.

Did I just jump through the multiverse? In what universe would William walk into the academic decathlon classroom willingly?

He's in his rowing uniform, which is like a tank-top wetsuit that showcases his massive biceps. His golden hair falls enticingly over his honey brown eyes, and I forget to breathe for a second when he looks at me and smiles.

I blink, but then my responding smile is like a thousand suns smashed together into one brilliant ball of light.

"Baby!" an obnoxious voice sounds behind me.

Horror. I realize that William wasn't smiling at me. He was smiling at Janie. Behind me.

Pit of Hell, open up. Take me now.

I close my eyes and pretend that I'm getting myself focused for the speeches, but really, all I'm trying to do is avoid facing my humiliation. God, I hope I didn't look that excited...but I know I did. I know I looked like a kid entering the toy store with their stash of birthday money. Fuck me.

I blow out a small breath, searching for my Zen, my cool, but that damn bitch has packed up and left me behind.

And then, William says the last thing I ever expect to hear. "This looks so cool, babe. How do you join?"

My eyes pop open to see Janie lead William over to the board. "It's easy. There's a sign-up sheet. And a little competition. But I know how you like those."

"Sweet." William scratches his name onto the sign-up sheet for the tournament.

My throat goes dry. The guys must have done this, right? That must be why he was so insistent that I compete. Somehow, they got William to join. By some miracle (can it be called a miracle if it's a demon doing it?), they roped him in. And now, I have the chance to go on an out-of-state trip with William.

An overnight, out of state trip.

Holy hell.

My eyes flicker to Kastros, ready to mouth “thank you” in his direction. The demons are trying, they really are. This is epic. But Kastros isn’t looking at me. He’s clutching the speech topic index cards tightly in his hand as he stares at William. His jaw looks a little tight.

I wonder if he’s annoyed that William waited until the last possible minute? Yeah, he was probably worried that William wouldn’t show up. Then he’d be stuck on a trip with just me and a bunch of other obnoxious teenagers with nothing to show for it.

Poor Kastros. Thank goodness he doesn’t have to take one for the team. I probably owe him ice cream.

I don’t even know if he likes ice cream. Note to self—find out if Kastros likes ice cream.

Kastros stands, shoving his seat back across the floor with a loud screech. Every eye turns in his direction. He’s the master of our fate.

I have to hide a smile. Because, frankly, I’m loving how he’s mastered my fate here. He can master my fate any time. Whoa. Wait. That sounded dirty. Rewind. Scratch that.

Everyone who is still standing, including Janie and William, take a seat. Kastros strides to the board and writes, *There are three topics on each card. You must choose one of them. One minute to prep. A minute and a half to speak.*

He turns to face us, and every back straightens just a bit. Who is going to have to go first? From all our previous practice, I know primacy and recency are the most important to memory. So you really want to go first or last. But if you’re last, you can get the benefit of a warmed-up audience. Or the detriment of one that’s been bored to tears.

My eyes scream, *not me!* Because I’d rather put off the torment and be one of the middle, forgotten speeches than first or last.

Kastros must be able to read my gaze because he walks by me and hands the first index card to William. Then he hits a button on his watch.

“Really? Shit. Okay.” William immediately hunches over his card and starts muttering to himself in this focused, unselfconscious, completely adorable way.

Kastros’s watch dings when time is up, and William stands, card still in hand. “Dang. That felt like zero time. But, okay. Yeah, I got this.” He blows out a breath and rolls his shoulders back, then strides to the front of the room.

He gives us all a dazzling smile.

And I sink onto my hands, determined to memorize every moment of this glorious speech and commit it to my stalker shrine.

“My topic was ‘What are five lessons you’ve learned from cartoon characters?’”

Ohh. He got a good one. I cross my feet at the ankles and wonder what amazingly deep lessons he’s learned. I wonder if we’ve watched the same cartoons.

William smiles at everyone again. And this time, the smile comes with a long pause. “So, growing up, I used to like, um—”

Uh oh, he said “um.” That’s verboten. I glance over to see Kastros jotting something down on a sheet of paper. Shit. He’s tracking this. But it will be fine. Totally fine. He’ll rig it so William gets to go.

“Yeah, I liked to watch *Squidbillies*. And I think that one of the, um, life lessons from it is that...uh...sarcasm is important?” That last bit comes out as a question.

Oh no. He’s bombing. Not only did he mention one of the most satirically, not-school-appropriate cartoons of all time, now he can’t even string together two sentences about it.

I take my hands off my chin and stare at my cuticles for the remainder of the minute. It’s a long minute, and I nearly pick my cuticles into non-existence during it.

When William finally sits, I don't even get a second to feel relief. Because Kastros is suddenly looming over me and sliding a card into my hand.

Dammit.

I glance down at my topics, which are all incredibly personal and uncomfortable. "Rigged!" I want to shout, but I can't.

My topics?

Is love real or an illusion?

Is true love the outcome of fate or choice?

*If fate determines love, then can you forgive your love if they betray you?
Or is betrayal simply a part of that fate?*

Shit.

I close my eyes and point, letting my finger control my destiny. And I land on the last damn topic. Fuck my life.

I quickly try to organize my thoughts, gather them up.

All too soon, it's my turn to speak. With sweaty palms, I clutch my index card like it's a lifeline. I make my way to the front of the room. I try to do the smile thing like William did, but I'm pretty sure that it looks more like a grimace.

I read my topic aloud and then start.

"This topic operates on a lot of assumptions that are counterintuitive to most Americans. We tend to believe in free will and forging our own destiny. But if some outside force has predetermined whom we love, then why wouldn't they also predetermine our pain? If they have control over one emotion, why not both? If our lives are actually predetermined, I'd argue that fury or forgiveness are also predetermined. Maybe we aren't in control of anything at all." My eyes scan the room and lock onto William's. He's sitting there, slack-jawed, as if...he's in awe. Of me.

Suddenly, my feet aren't sure they're touching the floor. I feel so light, I'm sure I must be floating. I continue, "It's rather boring to think that

everything is known, though, isn't it? Where's the fun in that? If everything is predetermined and there's no free will, then there's also no real surprises or excitement for God or the supernatural being doing all the choosing. And isn't surprise one of the best parts of existence? I hope that fate isn't in charge of love, because I think if it is, it loses a lot of its value." My eyes skip hesitantly over to Kastros to see how I'm doing.

His deep brown eyes drill right into mine. I keep our connection as I say, "Personally, I want love to be a choice."

Kastros holds up a fist to signal that my time has ended. I nod at him and then take my seat. My cheeks flame up as soon as I sit down, even though Tim pats me on the back.

"Dude, great job," he compliments.

"You were okay." Wade can never truly say anything nice; he doesn't have it in him. But the grumpy man does give me a smile. "Not as good as I'm gonna be though."

I sigh, just glad the spotlight is off of me.

The rest of the speeches, sans those by Janie's crew, are pretty smooth sailing. We are all pretty evenly matched. Of course, most of us have been practicing all year.

Janie has to go last. And when she stands up, all of her earlier swagger is lost. She practically hisses when she tells us her topic—*why intellect is more important than beauty*.

I have to use my hand to cover the snicker that comes over me. Oh, shit. I thought Kastros rigged my speech, but this, *this* is perfection.

Watching Janie struggle to justify the antithesis of her very existence is like getting a free pass at a bakery to eat anything you want. It's goddamned decadent.

High-fiving Kastros would be inappropriate, but I do send him an appreciative smile. To my surprise, I get one in return.

Once her stumbling speech is over and Janie has flounced back to her seat, Kastros walks to the board. He writes, *5 minute break. Then we will start the super quiz.*

I go get water at the fountain in the hall, because if round one was that intense, I can only imagine what two is gonna look like.

When I get back, William and Janie are gone. But so is half the room. Tim and Wade aren't in their seats either.

I sit down and roll my neck, ready to dish out some factoids.

Kastros slides a scantron onto each desk. Most of them are empty, but when he slides mine toward me, his fingers brush over the back of my hand. I glance up sharply, then to the side, to see if anyone else has noticed. He can't be doing that! He's my teacher, or so they think anyway.

But everyone is just snagging pencils from their bags or slowly trailing in. I grab my own pencil and then hunch over my scantron, ready to earn my spot. But I notice a small note at the top, just above the bubbles.

I liked your speech. I, too, would rather think love is a choice, not a curse.

For some reason, reading that makes me smile. Inside, it feels like I've just watched half an hour of *Funniest Home Videos* and am sagging in contentment on the couch, ribs sore from laughter, but completely at peace.

I write my name on the scantron, and then I wait for the first question of super quiz. There's no way Janie and the dingbats will make it through this round. I'm even a bit scared for William. But I know one thing—I'm going on this damn trip, come hell or high water.



I'M PRETTY SURE the demons are in a state of shock. Should I slap them? Shake them? Shove a putrid-smelling sock up their noses? Flash them my tits? I think I read somewhere that titty flashing can pull a male out of shock.

Zolroth insisted on driving me back from decathlon practice in Akor's minivan, since my parents still have my car keys, despite having no intentions of picking me up from school. Kastros sits in the passenger seat, muscular arms folded over his chest and his customary scowl etched firmly in place, and Raz and Van sit directly behind them. In the back, with me, is Akor, who's resting his head on my shoulder and humming "Hit Me Baby One More Time" in my ear while stroking my thumb. Not my hand, mind you, just my thumb, like it's some sort of micro-penis.

"I can't fucking believe it," Zolroth mutters for the one billionth time in the last minute. Somehow, his accent makes the crude words sound... well...almost sexy. The way he says "fucking" conjures up intoxicating images of the two of us—

Playing chess, obviously. What else would we be doing?

Cue: awkward, high-pitched mental laughter.

"How is this possible?" Raz demands, leaning forward so his arms rest on the center console. I want to reprimand him for not having a seatbelt on,

but then I remember he's a super scary, all-powerful demon, and the words get caught in my throat.

And *then* I remember that his fucking Center is around, causing him to be vulnerable, and I can't resist squeaking, "Put your seatbelt on!"

He turns marginally in the seat to stare at me, one eyebrow quirked and a smirk playing on his devilishly wicked lips. Even beat to a pulp, he's sinfully hot. Still smiling slightly, he slowly, purposefully, clicks the seatbelt into place and gives me a look that says, "Better?"

"Thank you," I huff as Akor transitions from humming to singing the words beneath his breath. His hand continues to stroke my thumb, practically jerking it off at this point. Not that I have any idea how to actually jerk off a cock, though I did do my research. For scientific purposes, of course. I wouldn't want to embarrass myself if the biology teacher asked me to point out the ballsack. Though...

I should probably switch schools if he ever asks me that.

Unless Raz transfers to my biology class.

And asks me to point out his balls.

And—

Conversation, mercifully, saves me from my own, idiotic mind.

"I don't understand how William, of all people, scored perfectly on the scantron," Van snipes, stabbing his fingers through his reddish-brown hair.

"I thought you guys did that on purpose," I admit, leaning forward slightly. Akor immediately protests and yanks on my thumb, propelling me backwards until my body is flush against his. The hard contours of his chest press against my soft, delicate curves, and my breath automatically hitches. Working to control the rapid *thump-thump-thump* of my heart, I add, "Wasn't that the whole point?"

Raz releases a guttural growl, eyes bleeding red, before he takes a deep, fortifying breath.

"No," he hisses simply, crossing his arms and glaring straight ahead.

I was shocked out of my mind when Kastros wrote the results on the board and put William—*William freaking Washington*—on top of the list. William received the highest score on the team. Honestly, it seemed so impossible that I just *assumed* the demons were behind it. But the expression on Kastros's face when he read the score? The horror intermixed with something akin to loathing? That couldn't be faked.

"Maybe he's just super smart? He *is* in some of my AP classes with me. Granted, he sleeps the majority of the time, but that isn't the point," I argue, slightly indignant that all of the demons are adamant he cheated somehow. Though, how he could've done that with Kastros in the room is beyond me. The vengeance demon has laser-eyes.

Besides, I've known William for longer than they have. He doesn't need to cheat. Sure, he's not the brightest bulb, and I never catch him in the library, but that doesn't mean he's not smart. For all they know, his secret hobby could be reading Wikipedia.

Zolroth snorts, ignoring the glare I level his way. "Smart, my ass," he quips.

"Shut up. Maybe he watches Jeopardy or something," I toss out.

One thing is certain—William Washington is traveling to Illinois with me. Well, me, Alanna, Wade, Tim, and Janie. Yes, *that* Janie. Despite the clusterfuck that was her speech, she did surprisingly well on the examination portion. Not William-level, of course, but decent enough to come in at seventh place, beating Molly for the final spot.

"Can we stop dissing my future boyfriend?" I ask, throwing my hands in the air and dislodging Akor in the process. All five of the demons stiffen, but before I can comment on the stony glares they exchange with one another, we pull up to Adam's preschool.

"What...huh?" I ask in disbelief as Akor reaches behind him, into the trunk, and procures a carseat.

What is going on? Why is Akor installing the carseat in between us right now?

“We hacked your mom’s phone,” Zolroth admits conversationally, seemingly unperturbed by what he just confessed. But me? I’m extremely, *extremely* perturbed. “Apparently, she and your dad have a dinner planned with some fancy client this afternoon at some fancy ass restaurant.”

“So we’re going to have a sleepover!” Akor squeals, leaning across the carseat, wrapping me in his muscular arms, and squeezing like a boa constrictor. Well, if boa constrictors were two hundred pounds of sinewy muscle with tattooed skin and pink mohawks. Semantics.

“But Adam...” I allow that sentence to hang unfinished. Really, there’s not much more I can say.

“He’s coming with us, of course,” Raz replies gruffly as we pull into the parking lot. Adam participates in an after-school program that allows me to stay at decathlon late when my parents can’t pick him up (which is the majority of the time). The lot is nearly empty, sans the occasional car and SUV that belong to the staff.

“Adam... Your...house... Why... No...” I’m not making a lick of sense, but come fucking on! Their house screams “demon torture lair” slash “bachelor pad for the criminally insane.” I’m ninety percent sure I saw an altar next to the washing machine the last time I visited. And I can’t forget about Jason, their newest pet human.

Hopefully, their *only* pet human.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head.” Akor accentuates each word with a kiss on my forehead. Pulling away, he smiles down at me with all the innocence of a convicted serial killer on death row. “We hid all the bodies.”

That’s a terrible joke.

It better be a joke.

Before I can protest their plan, Zolroth puts the car into park, and all of the demons turn towards me expectantly. For a full minute, I simply flounder in silence, my mouth repeatedly opening and closing like a gaping fish. Finally, I nod my head jerkily and slip from the car. Kastros, of all people, follows behind me.

“Katty!” Adam screams as soon as we enter, barreling into my arms. Sasha—the pretty red-headed worker—smiles in greeting when we step inside before her eyes trail over to Kastros, lust darkening her features.

“How was he today?” I ask, ignoring her blatant ogling. And the way it makes me feel—like thousands of fire ants are crawling just beneath my skin.

I reluctantly release Adam, who immediately races towards Kastros, plowing the six-foot-something man over. Kastros’s harsh features soften instantaneously as he ruffles my little brother’s hair affectionately.

“Perfect, as usual.” Sasha sidles a few steps closer, lowering her voice to a hushed murmur. “Is he yours?”

“Huh?” I blink at her stupidly, and she nods at Kastros, who’s currently nodding along as Adam regales him with stories about his day.

“Is he yours, or is he single?”

Fury clenches my heart as red sweeps over my vision. Surprised by my intense—and completely out of character—reaction, I take a calming breath, allowing my lungs to replenish their air supply.

“Y-Yes,” I stutter at last, before I can think better of it. “He’s mine.”

Abort mission! Abort!

“Dammit!” Sasha curses, scowling. “It’s always the good ones, am I right?”

I awkwardly laugh...before retreating like the hounds of Hell themselves are nipping at my ass.



AGAINST MY BETTER JUDGEMENT, WE ARRIVE AT THE DEMONS’...HOUSE... secret villain lair...only a few minutes later. Immediately, Adam races towards a humongous Lego set—I think it’s supposed to build Hogwarts or something—located in the middle of the room beside the pit that currently

has yellow caution tape across it. That had most definitely *not* been there before.

Come to think of it, the entire “house” has been transformed to fit my little brother’s needs. The television now has a collection of DVDs ranging from *Paw Patrol* to *Dora*. And the giant pentagram tapestry that used to hang on the wall? Yeah, that has been removed and replaced somehow with the contents of a *Home and Garden* magazine, down to the potpourri balls on the coffee table.

“People!” Jason barrels forward from around the corner, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The huge athlete is panting like he just ran seven miles. “Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi! HI! Hi! Hi! Hi! Ohhhhh shiny.” He whips his head to the side, where Akor is dangling a piece of metal. He then twists his head back to stare at me. “Brain.” Then to Akor. “Shiny.” Then to me. “Brain.” Then to Akor. “Shiny.”

“Come here, boy,” Akor coos, slapping both of his knees, the metal object still grasped in his hand.

Jason moves to his hands and feet and begins to race circles around the pink-haired pain demon, his tongue lolling to the side.

It’s the strangest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Go get the toy! Get the toy! Get the toy!” When he has Jason hyped up enough, Akor tosses the metal object at the nearby closet, which instantly careens open unaided...allowing a headless body to fall out, splattering across the wooden floorboards.

For a moment, no one speaks. Akor stares from me, to the body, and then to Adam, who mercifully has his back turned as he plays toy soldiers with Zolroth and Raz. Kastros merely rolls his eyes as he throws himself into one of the couches—you know, the one in the random fucking hole in the middle of the ground. Van merely smirks, leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest.

“Welp, this is fucking awkward,” Akor drawls as he begins shoving the body behind a potted plant. Not back in the closet, mind you, but behind this diminutive, artificial plant. When an arm falls off, I begin to dry-

heave, but Akor merely tosses the limb to Jason, who shakes his head from side to side, the appendage clasped between his teeth. “I have to feed my pet, you know? You zombify a guy, and suddenly, he becomes your responsibility. But don’t worry! He was already dead. I didn’t kill him. This guy, I mean.” He points towards the plant. “Not Jason. I totally killed *that* fucker. Accidentally, of course.”

Van snorts, shaking his head in pity, before jumping over the edge and joining Kastros.

“You just pushed a dead body behind a plant,” I state dumbly after I’ve regained control of my faculties. Akor flashes me a sheepish smile.

“You can say that I *planted* the evidence.” He snorts at his own joke, and from down below, Van breaks into laughter as well, no doubt having eavesdropped on our conversation.

“I don’t even...” I shake my head once. And then again. And then a third time. Because, really, there could never be too many head shakes in this situation. “I think I’m hanging around you five too much,” I confess. “This is becoming...*normal* to me.”

And it’s true.

Just a week ago, I would’ve been screaming in terror at what I just witnessed. Hell, my classmate is a fucking zombified dog-man, and I’m still here.

But why am I still here?

Why did I bring Adam here?

Those two questions haunt me like a malevolent poltergeist as I twist towards my brother, surprised to see Zolroth and Raz still taking the time to play with him. It’s odd to see men as large and as masculine as those two talking in unnaturally high-pitched voices as they move their toy soldiers towards Adam, who giggles uncontrollably. My heart swells with...something. The undefinable emotion lingers just out of reach. But when I try to grasp it, it slips through my fingers like a warm spring rain.

The front door of the house bounces open, ricocheting off the wood, and all of my demons jump to their feet instantly, wings extended and eyes burning a garnet red. Zolroth and Raz stand protectively in front of Adam, while Akor, Kastros, and Van push me behind their muscular bodies.

“Well, well, well,” a sultry, *feminine* voice says, amusement evident in her tone. “What do we have here?”



I TENSE AND look for the nearest weapon, which happens to be the remaining detached arm from Jason's chew toy. I snatch it up and wield it like a baseball bat, not caring what I have to do to protect Adam.

Is this Center? Is this the bitchy asshole demoness who's been terrorizing my demons?

My mind races a mile a minute, my eyes darting wildly.

And then Raz does something completely unexpected. He smiles and throws his arms wide in greeting.

What. The. Hell?

I drop the arm when Raz moves forward and embraces this woman and her entourage in the doorway. I step closer to Adam so I can protect him, but I crane my neck to look at this woman's arm as it lingers just a little too long on Raz's wings.

When she steps back, I can clearly see she is a female demon who isn't trying to disguise herself as human. Unlike the guys, whose wings are pretty Batman-esque, this female demon has wings that only go from her upper arm to her wrists, as if they're made specifically for gliding. They are a beautiful, bright fuchsia. But it's not her wings that catch my eye most. It's not even her Maleficent-worthy black horns. It's her video-game sized breasts. There is no way her body should be able to support those monsters with her waist size.

“She’s an envy demon, isn’t she?” I whisper to Akor, who’s sidled up on my right side. She has to be, with the way she’s making me feel so jealous that my pupils are probably slitted like cat eyes right now.

“Actually, she’s a scorn demon,” Akor replies, tossing an arm around my shoulders loosely. “Don’t piss her off, okay?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Unless, of course, she hugs all of them the way she just hugged Raz.

“Yeah, I know, but fair warning, you know what they say? Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. That saying came about because of her kind.”

The female demon looks Raz over from head to toe in a way that makes me ball my fists. Akor plants a soothing kiss on my neck.

“You look like shit,” the demon woman’s voice is low and husky, the epitome of sexy. Dammit.

She points at Raz’s face and asks, “Did you get into a fight with a meat grinder?”

Raz shrugs. “Attacked. I was going to ask if you guys have seen anything.”

“Yeah, actually, I heard a flock was in the area.”

“Shit. That might explain it.”

I whisper to Akor. “What’s a flock?”

“A group of angel warriors. Pain in the ass,” Akor explains.

The female demon has made it through the vestibule and walks toward us, her head tilted in curiosity. Her black eyes fly from me, to Akor, to the body. “Akor, good to see you. Did we interrupt a game? Are you guys playing Death and Dismemberment? It’s my favorite!” She gives a little clap.

“Just finished,” he says with a sigh and an aw-shucks finger snap.

“Excuse me?” I turn and back out from underneath his arm. “You told me that guy was already dead!”

What am I even still doing here? My feet don't move. I don't run. Because Akor gives me an Eskimo kiss and says, "I'd never lie to you."

And I believe him.

The female demon laughs. "Oh, Akor. I like this one. So trusting!" She thrusts a hand right in my face. "I'm Arariel."

"Ariel?" I ask, because she spoke close to my bad ear.

Right away, she straightens, jaw clenching.

I realize my mistake. "Sorry." I wave my hand frantically at my ear like I'm trying to put out a fire or something. "Deaf in that ear."

Her face melts like butter, getting soft and delicious once more. "Oh. My apologies. Were you born deaf?"

I sigh. "No. Car accident." I keep my answer clipped, trying to cut off conversation about it. I don't like remembering that night.

"You look so young. Were your parents driving?"

I shake my head. "It was a nanny." Before they had me to look after Adam, my parents hired help to look after me.

"You poor thing. I can't believe she was so careless!"

Dammit all. I can't stand to have people think ill of Ali, who was for all intents and purposes my mother when I was a child. "She wasn't. It was nighttime, and we'd just gotten ice cream at the drive through." I'd been a bit of a brat, trying to take the lid off of mine and dropping it on her back seat accidentally. She'd looked back to curse at me, then back up at the road and then—

"We hit a deer...or something," I say. The "deer" part of my explanation comes from the years of therapy where it was beaten into my head. For a long time after the accident, I'd had nightmares that Ali had hit someone, some huge, hulking shadow. But it had been dark. And what did I know? The only deer I'd seen as a kid was *Bambi*.

I try to yank myself out of the nostalgic whirlpool threatening to suck me under. I give a fake little smile that immediately transforms into a look of pure terror, because Adam barrels right past me to Arariel.

He wraps both arms around her and gives her a huge hug before he steps back and says, “Hi. I’m Adam. You have big boobs.” He’s completely nonplussed by the wings and horns. Maybe I let him watch too many superhero shows.

Arariel laughs. “You’re very observant. That’s usually the last thing anyone notices about me.” She glances up at me and winks.

Instantly, I soften a little toward her. Anyone who treats Adam well gets a gold star in my book.

Of course, the bonding moment is ruined when Jason comes bounding in. “I just peed outside. Are there more brains? Oh, your brain smells good.” He leans closer to Arariel, who just looks at Akor and raises a brow.

Akor just snatches up Adam and says, “Let’s go play fetch with the zombie-man-dog, okay?”

“Oh yeah! That’s epic! Can we throw heads for him?” It’s like he’s stepped into one of his favorite TV shows or something and he’s just rolling with it.

“I’m fresh out of heads, but I’ve got a severed hand we can use.”

“Yes!” Adam gives a victory screech.

Jason trots along behind them, waggling his butt and jumping up near Akor’s shoulder asking, “Can I eat the fingers? Can I? Can I?”

I want to facepalm. I want to beat myself with a stick. I’ve become a terrible influence, and my brother is going to grow up thinking playing with dead bodies is normal. “I need to get out of here.”

But a soft male voice at my back says, “Why? We just got here? The fun’s about to start!” I turn to the side to see four male demons and Raz. Were they behind Arariel? I couldn’t see past the boobs or my own jealous haze. They all hold lite beers in their hands.

“Watching your figure?” I can’t help but jab at Raz, gesturing at the prominent *Only 100 Calories!* printed on the can.

“Watching yours,” one of the new demons jests, winking at me and giving me a salacious once over before he takes a long pull from his beer.

Kastros and Van release low, warning growls, standing so close that their wings brush me when they tuck them closed, and the sensation of supple leather trails over my arms briefly before their wings disappear like they were never there.

Kastros’s hand comes down on my shoulder, and he pulls me tight into him, sending a surge of heat through my stomach. I’m a little surprised by the decidedly possessive touch, but I’m more confused with how much I like it. Choosing not to focus on either of those thoughts, I focus once more on the conversation at hand.

“Careful now,” Raz tells them. “I don’t think Kastros likes what you’re saying.”

“Why? Her figure is banging. I’d do her in a heartbeat.” Arariel licks her lips.

My jaw drops.

“Mmm...just imagining your pretty mouth open like that on my pussy gets me all riled up,” she grins.

But...but...is she a lesbian? And who says that to a complete stranger?

“No. She summoned us. If anyone’s corrupting her, it’s gonna be us.” Raz’s voice booms with authority. And, unless I’m mistaken, a hint of possessiveness.

No. It can’t be that. I’ve got to be wrong.

“Dajiel, Tatrysts, Wallim, Drogelzesh.” Van nods his handsome head in greeting at each of the male demons in turn, but how he can tell them apart is beyond me.

Are they quadruplets? I wonder.

And fuck my mouth with a razorblade, I realize I said that out loud. Great. Now everyone's going to think I'm Adam's age.

"Well, compared to us, you probably are." Arariel navigates between Kastros and me so she can make her way over to them. She snags a beer from the demon on the right and takes a sip before she turns to me. "I'll be eight hundred and forty-two this year."

Holy wow. That's older than my demons. Like way older.

Van grabs my hand and turns me towards him. "You might want to stop saying everything you think out loud, particularly when we all know that every third thought is about my cock."

Where do my traitor thoughts turn as soon as he says this? You guessed it.

Clamping my lips together and glaring at Van, who just smirks, I march over to Raz and steal the beer from his hand. "I need this more than you do," I tell him. Then I make my way over to the couch (the normal, brown leather one in the human-like TV room, not the pit). I kick off my shoes, raise my beer toward the guests in a toast and say, "To the rest of my night being normal!"

They must not like my toast because nobody but me drinks. They all just laugh.

Kastros comes and sits down in an armchair near me, looking me over and studying my face. Immediately, I'm worried there's something gross on it. Oh God, is there blood on me from that arm I picked up earlier?

But he gives me a hesitant smile.

The other demons join us in minutes, one of the quadruplets giving Raz a hard time for keeping his human face on at home.

"Come on, man, you gotta let your horns hang out sometime," quadruplet number one says.

He just shrugs, but his eyes flicker to mine and I know immediately that he's thinking about me and Adam. They switch back to human form to keep us comfortable, which is kind of sweet. I've never really thought

about it before, but I wonder if it's uncomfortable? I mean, where do their wings and horns go when they're not in their demon bodies? Do they just retreat into their bodies like lumps? Or tumors? Winged-tumors?

I turn to Kastros and sign, *Does it hurt?*

To my surprise he answers, *When I fell from Heaven?*

My mouth pops open. "Wait. You guys fell from Heaven?" That whole bit is true?

Zolroth comes to sit down next to me, tossing his arm up over the back of the couch just behind my head. "What are you telling her, Kas?"

Kastros uses demon sign language for a second, and Zolroth bursts out laughing. "That's a pickup line, love," he tells me.

"Oh." My cheeks burn scarlet. "So angels don't really fall and become demons?"

"They do." Arariel comes closer and perches on top of the coffee table near me. "I used to be part of a flock."

"We did too," the quadruplets say simultaneously.

She rolls her eyes at them and then gestures at Raz. "Their little murder of demons was born in Hell, though."

"Murder?" I ask.

"Crow reference—black wings. Stay focused, love. You've opened up Arariel's favorite can of worms. History. Prepare for a long, boring evening," Zolroth says.

"Shut your ignorant yap. It's fascinating." Arariel clasps her hands in front of her. "When God first discovered that worlds could be populated, it was by accident. He was working in his garden, culling the planetary plants, but he'd just been working in the lightning meadow before that, and had some lightning residue on his hands. A tiny trickle of lightning hit one of the planets. At first, he was sure it had been destroyed, and he reached down to pluck that planet off the vine, but then he saw the lightning had changed the atmosphere a bit, and the planet had become a lighter blue.

So, he left it, because at his core, God's a gardener. He's always cultivating some new form of life. He waited to see what would happen."

I'm rapt. This is the creation story unlike I've ever heard it, but that's not the only reason I'm captivated. I can picture everything she's saying perfectly, because I've been there in my dreams.

Why the hell am I dreaming about God's garden? Is it my overactive imagination? Something more? Something...otherworldly?

For some reason, my eyes are drawn to Raz when Arariel pauses to take a drink. His own eyes are bright red, burning with some kind of heat that slithers down my spine and lights my cheeks on fire. He gives a single nod, confirming my unanswered question, *Is she telling the truth?*

"So, life developed, and God realized that lightning is basically a catalyst, a fertilizer for the planets. So he experimented a bit more with it and ended up creating a golem."

I raise my hand like I'm in class, then immediately lower my arm.

Arariel smiles but doesn't mock me. "Yes?"

"What's a golem?"

"A man made of clay, fueled by fire. They're the predecessors of humans. And in some ways, superior. They don't require as much upkeep. Humans...are like orchids. They need to be babied and watched over nearly every moment, or they fail to bloom. They require lots of pruning to grow properly—"

"Pruning? Is that what they're calling it these days?" Zolroth snarks. "You mean shackling." He turns slightly on the couch so that his knee touches mine. "Before you go getting all enamored with Heaven because a former angel is telling you about it, let me just put this out there—they throw out the baby with the bathwater in Heaven. There are literally over nine million rules to follow, and the very existence of angels, who help keep up Earth's garden, is torture. Lucillania knows that better than anyone, and it's why she rebelled."

"Who?" I ask.

“Well, you probably know her better under the name Lucifer.”

“The devil’s a woman?”

“Obviously.” Arariel grins. “Do you really think a guy could pull off the level of evil genius necessary to undermine God?”

Good point.

This topic is just fascinating, twice as interesting as learning about the Bolshevik Revolution, which is one of my favorite decathlon topics right now. I lean forward and ask, “So you were an angel?”

Arariel nods. “A long, long time ago.”

“But we freed them,” Zolroth says with a grin. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Arariel just smiles and wags a finger at him.

Van suddenly appears with a veggie tray—I hadn’t even realized he’d been gone—and announces, “Snacks.” That diverts all attention from my lesson in metaphysics.

The demons all dig in with sounds of delight, and I’m struck by the contrast of Arariel and her unholy enjoyment of celery. It’s like water and a keyboard—vegetables and demons aren’t meant to go together. Weird.

“After this, no more boring history,” one of Arariel’s quadruplets says. “We came for an orgy, don’t get caught up—”

I nearly choke on my carrot. Zolroth has to pat my back really, really hard to help me, and the fear of humiliation is the only thing that keeps me from spraying orange flecks all over Arariel.

They have orgies? *With my demons?* I mean...with my demon friends?

“Alright, enough with the jokes, you’re gonna kill Katrina,” Zolroth scolds lightly. But then he adds, “And we aren’t done converting her yet.”

I go to whack him in the stomach for that comment, but Van says, “Cool your jets, little lady. They came for karaoke. I’m gonna go get Adam and Akor.”

Demon karaoke turns out to beat the pants off human karaoke, especially because one of Arariel's quadruplets is an illusion demon and can transform himself into any number of famous singers.

Adam and I end up holding hands, jumping up and down on the couch together and singing along to his performance of "I Love Rock n' Roll."

The sleepover at the demon's house actually turns out to be hella fun.



I DON'T COMPLAIN when the guys send Kastros home with me the following morning.

After a surprisingly blissful night of sleep in Raz's bed—while he slept on the sofa—I'm in a good mood. A really, really good mood. Because, believe it or not, the demons were not bad company last night. I even liked hanging out with Arariel and receiving a break from the pungent testosterone contaminating the air. When she wasn't flirting incessantly with me, she was actually pretty cool to talk to.

All in all, demons? Ten out of ten, would recommend as friends and karaoke partners.

"Kastros!" Adam tugs on the giant's arm as soon as we enter the foyer of my house. I tug my coat off just as Kastros kneels down and takes off Adam's. "Kastros!" he whines again. "I want to show you my new Lego set."

"Go," I tell Kastros with an encouraging smile. "It'll make his day."

Never in a billion, gazillion years did I believe that a badass, scary demon would develop a bond with my little brother. Correction, *five* badass, scary demons. But there's no denying that all five of them have chiseled their way into Adam's heart, and he into theirs. It makes my own heart swell until it's practically bursting.

All of my guys, getting along—

Not my guys.

Frowning at the whirlwind my thoughts have become, I gesture towards the staircase and Adam's playroom.

"Go," I say again, giving Kastros's broad back a tiny shove. The vengeance demon smirks at me, his dark eyes ensnaring my own, before he plants a tender, almost reverent kiss on my forehead. The heat from his lips seeps into my skin, lighting my veins on fire. I shudder before I can contain the entirely instinctive reaction.

Because a hot demon kissing you, even if it's a chaste one to the noggin? You tremble and get goosebumps. And butterflies. And—

"Kastros!" Adam gives the demon's hand an encouraging tug, and with another backwards glance at me, Kastros follows my little brother upstairs.

I watch them go with a pang in my chest. It's not a painful one by any means; it's more of a...confused pang. In a matter of minutes, there are dozens of emotions accumulating in me like a twenty-car pile-up. But this is one accident I'm not sure I'll escape from unscathed. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I *want* to, and that, more than anything, confuses the shit out of me.

I'm gonna have to analyze my feelings for these demons in extensive detail later today. At first, I would've easily been able to say I felt nothing but resentment towards them and a healthy dose of fear. But as time went on, that resentment transitioned into lust, still tangled with the terror from before. And now? I don't even know what to think; my brain is a toxic cocktail of feelings and emotions, each one more damning than the last. Ha. Damning. That was a totally unintentional pun.

Lost in thought, I don't even notice that there's someone already in the kitchen—or *two* someones—until I start a pot of coffee. Apparently, demons don't drink coffee. Who knew? No wonder they're from Hell. That's completely and utterly unnatural.

"Katrina!" My dad's strident voice causes me to jump five feet in the air, the mug I'd grabbed from the cupboard shattering on the tiled floor.

“Shit,” I murmur before I can rein in the curse word.

“Watch your language,” Mom reprimands as she strides forward.

Despite it only being around six, maybe seven, on a Saturday morning, both of my parents are dressed to the nines in matching, sleek suits. My mother’s is black—like her soul—while my father’s is a dusky gray. And then there’s me...in a pair of boxers I borrowed from Akor (who’s the smallest demon) and one of Raz’s baggy T-shirts. I didn’t even bother to brush my hair when I woke up this morning, desperate to beat my parents home from their “overnight” business trip. Honestly, I don’t know why I’m putting overnight in quotation marks. They no doubt *did* spend the night at some fancy-ass resort. I’m just not sure if they *needed* to.

“What do you want?” I’m suddenly tired. The type of bone-deep weariness that comes from carrying around a leaden heart.

“What do we want?” My dad releases a half-deranged, half-manic laugh, throwing his head back and smacking his knee. “What we want is to know where the fuck you were this morning.”

“At a friend’s,” I respond, just as the coffee machine beeps to indicate it has finished brewing. Stepping over the shattered remains of the first mug I dropped, I step onto my tiptoes and pull down a new one. Ignoring the eyes I can feel on my spine, peeling away layers of skin until the sinewy muscles and blood are revealed, I pour myself a generous amount of coffee.

“At a friend’s,” my mother repeats at last, disbelief evident in her tone. “You can lie better than that, Katrina.”

“But I’m not lying.” I spin around to face them fully, the mug clasped in both of my shaky hands. I pray to whomever is listening, be that my demons or God, that they don’t notice how my entire body jerks with desperate tremors. I’m driving two hundred miles per hour straight towards a brick wall, and no matter how many times I slam on my brakes, I know I won’t stop in time. The collision is inevitable, and all I can do is brace myself for impact.

“Don’t use that tone with me,” Dad scolds, a scowl etched onto his face. “We already decided we’re sending you to boarding school. You’ll be lucky if you don’t end up in prison before then.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I snap before I can reel in the words. But at this point, I’m not sure if I even want to. A twisted part of me wants to flay my parents open the same way they do to me, slashing at them until the brittle bone underneath is revealed. “I have done *nothing* wrong. I never do anything wrong. I’m the perfect, obedient daughter, and you know what? I’m sick of it!”

“You watch your mouth—” Mom begins, color erupting on her cheeks, but I cut her off before she can continue her tirade.

“No! I’m sick of the way you treat me and Adam. I’m sick of you showing up at random times and all of a sudden deciding you want to be parents! I’m sick of you pretending that you care, when all the evidence suggests that you don’t. You want to know how often you’re actually here? I’ve kept track. I’ve got calendars for the past three years. You only sleep in this house around one hundred and fifty days a year. You’re gone the rest of the damn time. You’ve never been to a single one of my tournaments, and you missed Adam’s Christmas pageant, even though I reminded you twice. If I didn’t do the grocery shopping, then Adam and I would have nothing to eat! You can’t just walk in here and demand things, when I know you won’t even be here to see it through. And there’s no way I’m leaving Adam and going to boarding school. You two would let him starve!” I’m panting heavily by the time I finish my improvised speech, but it’s worth it to see the rage emanating from my parents’ eyes.

“You really think you’re something special, don’t you?” Dad scoffs, and over his shoulder, I notice Kastros lurking in the shadows. He seems particularly massive this morning, his muscles flexing as he hurls daggers with his eyes at my oblivious parents. “But you, Katrina, are nothing but a *mistake*. You act like you’re so goddamn smart, but I’ve seen your grades. Nothing but Bs and even the occasional C. Isn’t it kind of sad that decathlon is the one thing you’re good at, yet you’re not even the best on the team? Doesn’t that say something about you, *my darling daughter*?” He turns to Mom and adds, “I told you at the hospital, I thought the nurses

switched her. Proof?” He jabs a finger at me. “No true child of mine would be like this.”

With each word he says, with each dagger he plunges into my heart, he takes another step forward until he’s hovering over me. I see Kastros tense, preparing to lunge forward, but I warn him with my eyes that I’ll be okay. They’re just words, after all, and though they can quite literally decimate your heart into shreds smaller than confetti, they can’t kill you.

His words won’t break me.

“Fuck you,” I hiss, raising my chin instead of cowering away like I did for years. “You’re shitty people, shitty parents, shitty—”

The slap comes out of nowhere. I don’t even see it coming. Hell, I’m pretty sure Mom didn’t see it coming either, if her startled gasp is any indication.

An ache spreads across my cheek, and my good ear rings. The mug of coffee slips from my fingers, crashing to the floor, as the scorching liquid burns my skin.

Time seems to slow down as a few things happen.

First, my dad is wrenched away from me by a livid Kastros. I’ve never seen such rage on his face before—on anyone’s face, if I actually think about it. It’s nearly unparalleled, as if this man, this demon, embodies pure and molten anger. The rage transforms his entire face until I can’t decipher where the demon ends and the man begins.

Second, my dad begins to whimper—helpless, pathetic sounds—as if he recognizes the face of death when he sees it. My mom, still standing at the kitchen counter, begins to cry. I would like to believe that the tears are over me, over the horror of what she just witnessed her husband do to her only daughter, but I’d be deluding myself.

And finally, Kastros seems to grow before my very eyes. That’s the only word I can think to use to encapsulate what I’m seeing. His shoulders become bulkier, splitting open his black T-shirt like some sort of sexy Hulk, and his eyes flash crimson. Pale blue horns protrude from his pitch-black hair, accompanied by his leathery wings.

Mom's sobbing now, collapsing to the ground with an audible thud, and the scent of piss fills the air. I'm pretty sure that's Dad.

Power surges through the air like a tangible electrical current, zapping at everyone who gets too close. It raises my pink hair, and goosebumps erupt on my arms at the sensation it evokes. I swear that the room is shaking, like a tiny earthquake has hit the house. The dishes rattle, and a few mugs fall from the still open cupboard.

And through it all, Kastros stands like...like...

Like vengeance personified.

His onyx hair blows around his face as he glares at my father before moving that piercing gaze of his onto my mother.

"Kastros," I whisper, placing both hands on the table as the house continues to shake erratically. "Kastros!"

He glances back at me, his face nearly unrecognizable, before breaching the few short steps between us and taking me in his arms. He breathes in my scent like it's the only thing keeping him grounded, and I lose myself to his embrace. And though I should be fucking terrified, I only feel safety and contentment in his arms, as if the rest of the world has faded away.

"Katty? Kastros? What's going on?" Adam asks, his tiny voice scared, and that shakes me out of the reverie I find myself in.

"It's okay, Adam!" I pull myself from Kastros's embrace just as Adam lunges forward, putting one arm around me and the other around the snarling vengeance demon. My little brother seems entirely unconcerned about the wings sprouting from his back, his pure red eyes, the anger emitting from him like smoke.

Actually...

I'm pretty sure there *is* smoke.

Before I can comment on it, Kastros throws me over one shoulder and Adam over the other. Carrying the two of us, he races out the front door, my sobbing parents following in his wake. I have no idea when they pulled

themselves off the floor, and honestly, I don't care. We exit the house and scatter across the lawn...

Just in time for me to see my childhood home go up in flames.

They say that vengeance belongs to God and that it's not up to us petty humans to enact.

But I don't think any of those people factored in demons before.



AFTER THE HOUSE BURNED DOWN, Kastros carried Adam and me back to the demon's townhouse. And somehow, there were two rooms ready for us. One was full of Legos and trains for Adam, and the other had a computer, decathlon stuff, and Lakewood Prep uniforms that were just a bit tighter and shorter than before.

We've been with them for a week now. I haven't spoken to my parents since that night. And I have no idea if they made any attempt to contact me, because Akor accidentally stepped on my phone after he heard what had happened.

And by "accidentally," I mean he grabbed it out of my back pocket, threw it on the ground, and jumped on it while he chanted, "Die! Die!"

But actually, things have been so much better. Every morning, Kastros has eggs and fruit for Adam, not the crappy toaster waffles coated in syrup that I used to make him. Every afternoon, while I do homework, he and Akor play fetch with Jason. And then Raz will play action figures with him, or Zolroth will crawl around on the ground in his suit and wrestle. Van likes to play hide and seek with him.

I don't think I've ever seen Adam smile this much. And every night, I fall asleep, eyes brimming with tears in gratitude. Because each day has been the best day of my little brother's life. And how could I ever ask for more than that?

Of course, there are moments I thoroughly regret the fact that Akor destroyed my phone.

On Wednesday, Adam even convinced all of the guys to play *Animal Parade* and follow him through the house. Van was a kangaroo, Raz was a duck, Akor was a bunny with very prominent front teeth, Zolroth was an elephant, and Kastros was a bear. It was the epitome of hilarious and adorable as they all went through every room in the house, even flying Adam down into the pit to march around the column of fire three times. Because in Adam-logic, things needed to be done in threes. I followed them the entire time, wishing that I could record the moment. Zolroth eventually surprised me by buying me the newest iPhone, but when I begged them to reenact their zoo parade, all of the guys vehemently declined.

Besides the vast improvement in my home life, things seemed better at school too.

Stacy's more popular friends have started talking to me, which they never did before. This morning, I even got invited to sit with them at lunch.

My heart pounds as I carry my sack lunch, complete with a little note from Kastros each day, to the popular kids' table. Stacy has saved me a seat. And on the other side of the saved seat sits—I freeze in terrified awe—William Washington.

He looks scrumptious today, his hair ruffled by the wind, wearing a rowing sweatshirt over his uniform, eating an apple like he's a damned snake and this cafeteria is Eden.

I swallow hard before sliding into my seat.

Stacy turns to me and waggles her eyebrows underneath her bangs. That damn, scheming bitch! She did this on purpose. And I both love her and hate her for it.

"Hey, Kat. How was Calc?" she asks, innocently opening a piece of string cheese as if she didn't just say my name too loudly in order to get William's attention.

"It was fine," I mutter, feeling a raging blush creep up my cheeks.

On my other side, William turns in our direction, and I can feel his gaze lock onto me like it's the bullseye of a gun.

"Hey, Katrina, ready for our big trip this afternoon?" William asks, those honey-brown eyes even more gorgeous today than they've ever been.

"Yeah." I stick with a one-word answer and a smile in an attempt to prevent the word vomit that seems to afflict me whenever I try to talk to him.

"So, what are these tournaments usually like?" He leans back in his chair and directs his full attention at me.

I pause in the middle of opening my lunch bag. "Um, I've never been to an out-of-state tournament before." I'm simultaneously embarrassed to admit that because I've been on the team since freshman year and delighted that I didn't say anything awkward, like about the fact that I'm currently wearing a thong.

William's eyes light up, and he leans closer. I can actually smell his toothpaste and its minty, spicy freshness as he whispers, "Is the thong like a winning ritual? We have a lot of little rituals in rowing, but I think I like yours better."

Fuck my life with a cracked glass dildo.

William starts to laugh. "That's a new one. I didn't know you were so funny, Katrina." He bites his lip, and it's totally adorable. Normally, it would send me into fits of swooning, but maybe I'm still so embarrassed that the dildo thing popped out that I can't properly fan the flames of passion.

"Hey, do you want to sit together on the drive down?"

Wait. What? Has Hell opened up and taken over?

"I thought you would want to sit with Janie," I hedge.

Stacy kicks me under the table for not immediately saying yes. She's totally eavesdropping like a good best friend so we can dissect this conversation like a frog later.

William gives a non-committal little shrug. “Janie and I...we’re not serious or anything. Plus, I could really use a study buddy.”

His leg nudges mine under the table, and I can feel his pants rubbing against the bare skin of my leg because my skirt is so short.

“Okay,” I squeak out.

“Katrina!” Raz bellows from somewhere behind me.

I turn to see him smoldering. What’s wrong? Did something happen to Adam? I can’t imagine what else might put such a furious look on his face.

I quickly stand, grabbing my lunch, and hurry over to him, very aware that William’s eyes are currently trailing over the back of my legs and my very short skirt.

“What is it?” I whisper between my teeth, heart thudding with fear.

“Did you forget your lunch detention!” Raz booms loudly, for the benefit of the other students.

My fear transforms into fury. I want to strangle him. How dare he embarrass me like that!

But then Molly calls out from the popular table. “You got detention for P.E.! Lucky! Mr. D, what do I gotta do to eat lunch with you?” This sets off a series of catcalls and snickers as Raz leads me out of the cafeteria’s double doors and into the hall.

“I suppose you’re officially one of the cool kids,” Raz says as he leads me towards the gym.

I shrug. “I guess.” I don’t feel like one. “I think this means your time with me is almost done.”

Raz’s dark eyes find mine, and the hallway fills with emotion until it feels like I’m treading water.

“William asked me to sit by him in the van.” I give a single-shoulder shrug and a smile, but it feels empty. I should be thrilled about this, ecstatic even. It’s all I’ve wanted for years.

But as soon as William is a sure thing, the demons will go away. My summons will end, and they'll be onto the next one. And it will become me and Adam against the world once more. That used to be the way it was. And I was fine with it. But now...

I blink away the stupid tears that form in my eyes. I have lectured myself endlessly to not get attached. Even my dreams warned me away from the demons.

But how do you stay aloof? How can you not get attached, when people swoop into your life and make it better than you could have possibly imagined? Maybe even better than your dreams?

"Better than dreams?" Raz's voice is husky, and he steps closer to me, peering down into my eyes.

"Shit. I said that out loud?" I whisper, as his face edges closer to mine.

"Yup." I feel his whisper against my lips, and it's soft and warm.

I close my eyes...

"Mr. Dämon, what is happening!?" Van's voice snaps like a whip.

My eyes fly open, and then I turn and flee down the hall, not looking at Van, who's practically vibrating in fury.

Oh God.

I shove open the door to the girls' bathroom and hide in a stall. I put the lid down and perch on top of it, drawing my knees up to my chest.

What the hell just happened?



I CLIMB into the decathlon van with more than a little trepidation. I'm not only scared about sitting next to William for hours on end, I'm also nervous because I agreed to leave Adam with the rest of the demons while I'm gone. And even though this past week has proven that they are capable of so much kindness and I'm not worried about Adam's safety, it's still the first time I've left him since I was in that car accident and stuck in a hospital bed for a week. My heart isn't thrilled by the prospect.

Kastros stands outside the van with a checklist, looking dark and intimidating and not at all excited about the prospect of a six-hour drive with a van full of teenagers. I give him a hesitant grin before putting the duffel I packed this morning into the vehicle and going to the doors and climbing in.

I make my way to the back of the van, since I am one of the first to arrive. I'm eternally grateful that it's Kastros who's chaperoning our little trip, not Raz. I don't know how to face him right now. I have no idea what to say, other than I'm a total idiot.

Alanna has taken up two seats in front of me, stretching her legs out as she quickly cycles through flashcards. When I get settled, she turns to me with a smile that seems a little weirder than usual. Then again, I've always gotten strange vibes from her. She's got this intense bossy thing going on, and before I partnered up with Tim (out of self-preservation) she was constantly trying to get me to study with her. And while I like learning

stupid facts, I seriously think it's all she does. She's a history buff, and I don't think that I've seen her get more than one question wrong.

And the day she did...I swore I thought Mr. Penn was gonna end up dead behind the school bleachers or something. They argued for almost forty minutes over the answer.

"Hey, pretty girl." Alanna flashes me a smile.

"Hi," I awkwardly return.

"Want to quiz me?"

I bite my lip. "Sure, I mean, I can for a second, but when William gets here, I told him I'd help him practice."

Her grin widens until it looks a little unnatural. I don't think anyone's ever told Alanna that sometimes, she gets a creepy clown smile. "Good, he'll need it. Let me get my other set of cards, and you can use those with him."

She ducks down and grabs a rubber-banded set of at least five hundred cards. "That should keep you guys busy, though I'm sure he'd rather be busy other ways."

I give her a pained grin, because I seriously don't think she knows it's super socially awkward to talk about other people's sex lives to their face. Not that William and I have a sex life. Or that I have a sex life. Or... I undo the rubber-band on the study cards in order to stop my idiot brain and prevent it from saying any of that shit out loud.

Incubation Period: Interval between the receipt of a pathogen and onset of a clinical disease.

Yippee. Science cards. My least favorite. Luckily, William arrives quickly, hopping up into the van with an easy grin when he sees I've saved him a seat.

"Hey." He comes and sits beside me, strapping in. I can't tell if it's an accident or intentional, but his leg ends up pressed against mine. I wait for the tummy flutters to start, but before they can arrive, Janie St. James shows up.

As soon as she spots William, she beelines for us and straps in on his other side.

My stomach curdles like rotten milk. Well, this is gonna stink.

“Willie, hey.” She reaches up a hand and ruffles his hair.

She calls him Willie? And he lets her? I’ve never heard a more limp-dick nickname in my entire life. If I was him, I wouldn’t allow it.

William doesn’t seem too bothered by it though. He just smiles at her and says, “I’m gonna study with Katrina now. Okay?”

She makes a little pouty face. “Oh, I thought we could study together.”

Alanna pipes up. “Studying is much better one on one. I can help you, Janie. I’ve got tons of cards. Do you want to come sit by me?”

Janie eyes the way William’s leg is still touching mine. “No. I’m good. Thanks.” When William turns toward me, her eyes turn into daggers and I know I’m going to have to watch my back.

I briefly wonder if William is worth the hassle of turning Janie into an enemy. But then I check myself. If? I’ve been crushing on this guy for years. Of course he’s worth the hassle!

A skeptical, errant little thought inside of me says, *You wouldn’t have that hassle if you kissed Raz instead. Or Akor. Or Van. Zolroth. Kastros.*

I chase that little thought around in my head so I can beat it with a baseball bat. But the little fucker hides and snickers at me.

I end up giving William an overly bright smile, one that probably looks just as creepy as Alanna’s clown grin. “Ready to get started?” I ask, because I’m incapable of making small talk with him like a normal human being.

“Sure,” he responds, shifting slightly so that his back is to Janie and he’s facing me. I turn a little toward him and my skirt rides up. As I tug it back into place, his eyes dart down. Then they slowly travel back up my torso, lingering on my chest.

And for some reason, that doesn't make me as hot as it should. Maybe that's because Kastros slams shut the back doors of the van at that moment, or because Tim, Wade, and Darrel come piling into the van at that time, filling the van with the ripe scent of teenage boy.

They pile in, quoting *Monty Python* as they do. "I fart in your general direction!" Tim says with a horrid French accent as he slides into a seat next to Alanna.

The other guys collapse into giggles as she rolls her eyes. "We are not watching those dumb movies again the entire drive."

"Yeah, we are," Wade retorts. And then he sets up a tablet, and the three stooges proceed to argue about which *Monty Python* to start with, until Rochambeau determines that *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* is the winner.

Kastros climbs into the front of the van. He's so huge that the van rocks as he climbs in. He fiddles with the GPS for a second before honking loudly. That's when my worst nightmare occurs.

Raz gets into the front passenger seat. He turns around and glares at us. "Alright. I'm the second chaperone for this tournament. I don't want to see any crap from any of you, or I'll make you run laps until you pass out."

The van immediately goes quiet. Nerds do not like to be threatened with physical activity.

I dart my gaze around the van as Raz explains that we'll be stopping for dinner halfway through the drive. I cannot make eye contact with him. I just can't. I also can't explain why my heart is suddenly racing, my throat has contracted, and my palms have gotten damp. I rub them on my skirt to dry them off, but when I do, William slips his hand down and traces his pinkie finger over the back of my hand.

I freeze, and my eyes fly up to the front. I meet Kastros's gaze in the rearview mirror, and his jaw is tight, like he knows exactly what's happening.

I drop my eyes to my lap and watch William's hand for a second. His fingers are so long and graceful compared to mine.

Raz's voice cuts through my contemplation. "There will be another car caravanning with us. I have some family who are going to the same place."

Confused, I turn in my seat to see an electric blue Dodge Charger screech into the parking lot. Akor is behind the wheel. And in the backseat, giggling like a maniac, is Adam. I want to jump out of my seat and throttle him for driving so fast with my little brother in the seat. But Kastros starts up the van, and all I can do is twist in my seat, my hand pulling away from William's, so I can peer out the back window in time to see Van and Zolroth walking toward the car and climbing in.

Guess we're all going on a little field trip.



TWO HOURS INTO PRACTICING WITH WILLIAM, I'M SIMPLY AMAZED. HE hasn't missed more than ten questions.

"Do you have a photographic memory?" I ask, setting the cards down on my lap.

He gives me an easy grin. "I guess."

From behind him, Janie grumbles quietly, "Can't remember to call me back though," as she sends yet another string of texts out into the world. She's tried once or twice to steal his attention, but eventually, he told her that his parents really want him to get a scholarship and he has to focus.

I feel that. Parental pressure is the worst. And I'm so relieved to be free of it.

William reaches forward and grabs the stack of cards in my lap. His hands deliberately close over mine, and his fingers stroke my wrists for a second before he says, "Let me quiz you now." He gently tugs the stack of cards away but drags his hand along my thigh instead of just picking them up.

I try not to gasp at the sensation, but I do hold my breath, and when William catches my eye, he grins.

He knows exactly what he's doing. He leaves the cards on my thigh when he reaches the edge of my skirt, and then his thumb traces over my bare skin.

What is he doing? Why is he doing this in public? He knows Janie is right there. Raz and Kastros are just up front.

I clear my throat shakily. "Will you ask me science questions? That's my weakest subject."

He nods. "Sure."

"Great. I started reviewing the infectious disease cards. I got through herpes but..." I trail off as William removes his hands from my thighs.

"Herpes, got it." He bites down on a grin, and I try not to blush as I glance hesitantly at the front.

Kastros's eyes are on me in the rearview mirror, not even on the road. And that tic in his jaw? It reminds me of that final night with my parents.

I wonder if it's because I'm close to getting what I wished for. Once William and I are officially together, I think the terms of my summons cease. But the demons have become such an integral part of my life. I wonder if Kastros is as upset as I am that we're so close to saying goodbye.



WE ARRIVE at the hotel a few hours later, wheeling in our luggage as Alanna squeals at the top of her lungs and Wade adopts an unimpressed look.

“I’ve seen better,” he tells me snidely as his eyes flicker to the five-tiered chandelier hanging in the entrance.

I have to admit—Kastros went all out when he booked this place for our stay. The hotel screams opulence and wealth. The lobby itself makes me think we transported back in time one hundred years to the mansion of a governor or someone equally as grand. Two spiraling staircases lead to a second-floor balcony that overlooks the lobby below. In the direct center of the room, basking in the light of the chandelier, is an assortment of old-fashioned, high-backed chairs that could’ve been plucked straight from an antique store or an estate sale. They sit comfortably on a circular, cashmere rug embroidered with intricate golden strands. There’s a grand piano as well, directly adjacent to a waterfall spewing multi-colored lights. As I watch, transfixed, the light changes from a light green to a brilliant purple and then to a dusky blue.

I have no idea how Kastros was able to convince the school to pay for all of this, especially after we had tryouts to limit the number of kids who could come. But then again, he’s a scary motherfucker when he needs to be.

At some point during the drive, the car holding Akor, Van, Zolroth, and Adam fell slightly behind. I'm ninety-nine percent sure Akor decided to impulsively take Adam to see the biggest ball of yarn in the continental United States. I think I read that's in Kansas...about six hours away from our hotel.

"Alright!" Raz claps his hands together as he glowers down at us. And when I say "down," I mean it. He quite literally towers over even the tallest person—which is William, by the way, followed shortly by Wade and then Darrel. "We're going to check you all into rooms. Stay here, and stay out of trouble." He directs the last statement with a pointed look in my direction. If I'm not mistaken, his scowl deepens even more, especially when his eyes flick to William chatting with Tim.

Kastros scowls as well, folding his huge arms over his even bigger chest, before stalking towards the reception desk. Raz, after a lingering look at me, follows after his friend.

The others all but collapse where we stand, dropping to the ground or perching on their luggage. I'm just about to do the same when I feel a skeletal hand squeezing down on my shoulder. Her acrylic nails would be easy to spot anywhere, painted a dark blood red. Janie sneers down at me before quickly plastering on a tight-lipped smile.

"Katrina," she coos, her voice saccharine sweet while simultaneously dripping with menace. It's like a pretty-colored acid that cascades across your skin, leaving nothing behind but bones and guts. "We need to talk."

"Not without a witness," I blurt before I can stop myself. Her eyes flash, and her grip tightens to the point of pain as she glares at me.

"Now, please." She practically yanks my arm out of the socket as she drags me away from the group and towards a hallway housing the public restrooms.

And a perfect place to murder me without anyone there to see it...or stop it.

When she reaches the end of the hall, she releases me like my skin is toxic and spins on her heel. A glower mars a face that would be beautiful if it

wasn't currently twisted into an imperious, haughty death stare.

"Stay away from William," she hisses.

"Excuse me?" I physically stumble back a step as if her words are a blow to my chest.

"You heard me, bitch. Stay away from my man."

"I don't—"

"Don't you have enough guys fawning over you?" She sneers at me like I'm nothing more than a bug beneath her shoe. How is it possible that she makes me feel so small with one look? "I mean, seriously," she continues on, pacing, "you have Zolroth so desperately in love with you that he doesn't see other girls. And the teacher—Kastros? Are you fucking him too? Even that gym teacher can't stop staring at you throughout class. And I saw the counselor watching you when you weren't looking in the hallway. Is your vagina golden or something? It's not fucking fair! Why do you get *all* of them?"

Her words send my head into a tailspin as I blink rapidly at her. In love with me? What? She's obviously delusional, her jealousy blinding her from the truth, making her see things that aren't there.

"Janie," I begin, attempting to place a hand on her arm. Honestly, I don't even know why. For reasons I can't fathom, I feel the irrational need to *comfort* her. There's real pain in her eyes that not even her anger towards me can obscure. "I'm—"

"Don't you fucking dare say you're sorry," she snaps, pausing her pacing so I'm gifted the full intensity of her penetrating glare. "Don't you fucking dare."

"But—"

"Everyone is in love with you, Katrina." For a moment—for a brief, brief moment—the anger bleeds from her voice, leaving behind only heartache and pain. Agony. Her long lashes flutter shut as she takes a deep, calming breath. "But no one is ever in love with me." Like a flash of lightning ripping apart the night sky, vitriol returns to her fiery gaze. "How would it

feel if I was with Zolroth? If I was kissing him, fucking him..." She allows her suggestive words to hang in the air between us like stagnant dust particles. Her smile is the slashing edge of a knife.

Jealousy churns in my stomach like a nest of hissing snakes. They coil around each other, becoming so incredibly tangled that no amount of corralling will pull them apart.

"You stole William from me," she whispers, inching a step closer. "So I'm going to steal Zolroth from you."



JANIE'S OMINOUS WORDS ARE STILL CIRCULATING THROUGH MY HEAD AS I rejoin the others.

I see Raz and Kastros still in conversation with the front desk worker, and William is engaged in a heated debate with Tim, Darrel, and Wade. When he catches sight of me, he whispers something to the others and makes an immediate beeline in my direction.

My heart jolts as he steps directly in front of me, flashing a brilliant smile. Before, I would've memorized every inch of his perfection and placed it in my spank bank to dissect later, but now, I can only muster up a tentative smile of my own in return. Over his shoulder, catapulting huge-ass boulders at me with her eyes, is Janie. She huffs and tosses her silky blonde hair over her shoulder before focusing on whatever Alanna is saying to her.

"Kat," William breathes. "Um...I was hoping to ask you something."

I can see Kastros and Raz returning to the group, both of them eyeing William suspiciously and with great trepidation. A part of me wants them to remain far, far away, but another part of me, a part I can't name, wants them to save me from this conversation. I immediately shush that second part with an internal growl.

"What do you need?" I query. "Is it about the tournament? Did you get the rulebook Alanna emailed over?"

“It’s not that...” He shifts from foot to foot, repeatedly sliding his hands in and out of his pockets.

“What is it?”

I can hear the distinct pound of Kastros’s giant footsteps as he veers in our direction. William’s eyes widen as he stares at the vengeance demon over my shoulder, and I see a trickle of sweat on his forehead.

“I was wondering if you wanted to go out with me sometime while we’re here,” he says at last, and the footsteps behind me abruptly stop.

Did...?

Did William Washington just ask me out on a date? An actual, honest-to-God date? Like, with dresses and flowers and kissing?

Ohmygawd.

I wait for the flurry of butterflies that I always expected to feel when I dreamed about this moment, but they don’t immediately come. I chalk it up to nerves as I stare at my crush’s handsome, heavily tanned face.

“You...want to go...onadatewithme?” The last several words blur together as my tongue trips over itself in shock. I can feel heat rushing to my cheeks in mortification as William’s smile grows. It’s apparent he finds amusement in seeing me flustered. I clear my throat with the intensity of a dying hyena and attempt to adopt a nonchalant (totally not nonchalant) posture. “I mean, you want to go on a date with me?”

Janie’s face briefly flashes in my mind—the genuine pain in her eyes when she accused me of stealing William—but I wash that image away in an ice-cold wave. She has been nothing but a jealous, nasty bitch to me since elementary school. She doesn’t deserve my sympathy.

Besides, I’ve been in love with William Washington for *years*. Don’t I deserve this? Don’t I deserve just one date with the guy I’ve been pining for since I first learned what a vibrator was?

“I heard that on the last day of the tournament, we get a few hours of free time,” William states. “And I was hoping I could maybe take you out for

dinner?”

“I... Yes!” I all but scream. Hoping to regulate my volume, I tack on, “I mean, of course. I would love to go on a date with you...Willie.”

Willie?!? Did I really just steal his ex’s nickname for him?

This is why you’re single, Kat.

If William noticed my slip, he doesn’t comment on it. Instead, he merely smiles softly before jabbing his thumb over his shoulder.

“I need to go grab my suitcase, but I’ll see you in a little bit, okay?”

“Yeah,” I mutter, my heart in my throat. Literally. I can feel each consecutive thump like I’m swallowing the organ whole. And if there’s any organ I’m swallowing whole, it’s not gonna be a heart, if you know what I mean.

I have a date with *William Washington*.

The sky has fallen. Hell has frozen over. And somehow, the demons pulled off this impossible matchmaking quest.

“Oh my gosh,” I breathe, spinning on my heel to see Raz and Kastros both staring at me with indecipherable expressions. Raz is holding a handful of keycards, his arm halfway extended as if he was preparing to hand me one. But his expression is frozen, a deep crease between his brows, and his lips are thinned. Kastros appears as impassive as always, except for a brief glint of pain in his dark eyes. “I have a date with William Washington,” I say out loud, and Raz’s lips twist into a scowl.

“Good for you, princess.” The hostility in his voice takes me by surprise as he shoves a keycard into my hand. Room 666. Huh. Cheeky demons.

Without a word, he stomps away, leaving me alone with a blank-faced Kastros.

“What’s his problem?” I mutter, boring holes into Raz’s retreating back.

I thought he would be happy for me—and happy to finally be rid of me once and for all.

So why does he look so...heartbroken?

And why does my heart feel broken as well?



I END up in a room with Alanna and Janie, so that's not awkward at all. Our evening is full of pillow fights and nail painting, not bone-crushing silence or ninja-throwing-star glares... This is said sarcastically, by the way.

Actually, the constant sound of Alanna mumbling as she flips through notecards in a frantic last-minute review is pretty much as good as the conversation gets.

Akor's van isn't back yet, though Adam has been texting me on Zolroth's phone. And when I say texting, I mean sending me cute little poop emojis. I can't slip into the hallway because Raz put duct tape from the door to the doorframe so that we can't sneak out, so I slip into the bathroom to video chat with Adam.

I call Zolroth's phone, and he picks up on the first ring. "You're in huge trouble—"

His lecture is cut off when Adam calls out, "Is that Katty? I wanna see her!"

Unable to refuse Adam's imperious commands, Zolroth hands over the phone, and I see my little brother's adorably chubby cheeks. "We saw the giant yarn!"

"Cool! Did you take a picture?"

“Only about a zillion!” Adam bobs his head to whatever song is on the radio. “Katty, look!

Semi-truck!” He forgets to turn the phone so I can see what he sees. But I’d rather look at his adorable little smile anyway.

What am I going to tell him when his new friends disappear? How am I going to handle that? Tears fill my eyes, and I talk to him for a few more minutes about his time with the demons. But eventually, I hear Zolroth asking for the phone. I say a hurried goodnight to him, hanging up before the demon can grab the phone back and lay into me for agreeing to go on a date with William, after I went on a fake-date with him. I suppose we should have had a fake break-up first, but it’s my only fake relationship and I don’t know the rules for those things.

I close my eyes and fake sleep because real sleep won’t come.

Eventually, after an hour or so, I hear the other two breathing evenly, and I sit up in bed. I feel restless. I should be swoony over my upcoming date with William. But instead, I feel anxious. What if he has expectations? What if he hates the way I kiss?

I climb out of bed and start pacing. Eventually, I make my way onto the balcony so that I won’t wake up my roommates. That’s when I see Van, standing on the balcony right next to mine, leaning over the railing as he peers down at the people walking below.

“Van?” I call out softly, sliding the glass door slowly shut behind me.

“Hey.” He smiles over at me, and I’m struck for the millionth time by just how gorgeous he is, particularly when he’s not even trying and his smile is soft and genuine.

“Adam asleep?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, he fell asleep an hour ago. One second, he was telling me all about Godzilla and Mothra, the next, he was just passed out.”

I smile fondly. Adam does that a lot, falling asleep mid-sentence.

There's a *whoosh*, and suddenly, Van's on my balcony, his wings stretching up behind him and casting us into shadow. "Other people—" I start to blurt, worried that we'll be seen.

But Van's arms are around my waist, and we're streaking towards the hotel garden before I can finish my thought. There's no one else around when he lands near a beautiful white gazebo that looks like it belongs in a gardening magazine and is probably used for weddings. Beautiful red roses climb up its posts and perfume the air. We walk over to it, and I'm shocked to see all of the guys but Kastros sitting inside, beers in hand. Because this looks like a manly beer spot. *Not.*

"Wait, aren't you supposed to be watching Adam?" I immediately turn a scolding look on Van.

"Kas is with him," Van says, tucking his wings behind him before making them turn invisible. He takes a seat on the bench next to Zolroth, who levels me with a glare.

"You said yes to a date with William."

For some reason, his annoyance ratchets up my anxiety. "Look, I know we probably should have had some big fake rom-com style break-up scene before I said yes to him, but I really didn't expect him to ask."

Honestly, I thought all their matchmaking attempts had completely bombed.

"Bombed?" Van gives me a harsh smile before he takes a pull from his beer.

Crap. I need to wash my mouth out with soap, so it will stop saying every thought in my head.

"I've got something you can wash your mouth out with," Raz growls.

Zolroth groans and adjusts his pants. "Come on, man. Don't say shit like that."

I'm so totally lost. Was he going to make me drink beer to wash out my mouth? My brow furrows, and Van starts chuckling.

“You’re so innocent, Katty.” His eyes take on a darker gleam than I’ve seen before. “But how innocent?”

It should make me scared, but it doesn’t. I can feel the ripple of his lust power in the air, making my nipples and throat both tighten in anticipation.

But I talk myself down. I take a step back and turn away from him. Van has told me himself that he’s not even into sex anymore, and he most definitely is not interested in me. His power is just going wonky because he’s annoyed.

I slide into a seat next to Akor, and he hands me his beer. “I’ll go grab the next round,” he declares, but nobody else looks at him. Their eyes are all on me, and it makes me ten kinds of nervous. I quickly down the second half of Akor’s beer and try to make small talk. But nobody bites.

“Where’s he taking you to dinner?” Zolroth asks, accusation saturating his tone.

And that’s it. For some reason, I can’t stand that he’s so upset when I didn’t even do anything wrong.

I stand up and stare down at him. “I don’t know. Okay? I don’t know. But isn’t this what you wanted? Wasn’t this your grand plan all along? Complete my summons and help me get together with William so you can go home?”

Zolroth doesn’t look at me; he just angrily peels the label off of his beer bottle.

His dismissal cuts at me, and I whip away, stomping across the garden toward the pool area. It’s locked down for the night, but the water glimmers like fluorite, a gemstone Alanna quizzed me about this afternoon.

I hear footsteps behind me, and I turn, wondering if I need to retreat further. If it’s Zolroth or Raz coming after me, then I definitely can’t handle talking to them right now. But it’s not. It’s Van. His reddish hair and hint of stubble look amazing in the moonlight.

I swallow hard and turn back to the pool, staring at it over the wrought iron gate that has a big “Closed” sign on top.

Instead of a lecture, like I expect, Van asks me, “How do you feel about your upcoming date with William?”

I chew on my lip as I stare at the water for a second before turning to look at him. “Honestly, I’m nervous. I’ve dreamt about this for so damn long. But what if I mess it up?”

Van tilts his head and furrows his brow. “How could you possibly mess it up?”

“I could say something stupid. You know, like when I blurt out my thoughts all the time?”

“That’s adorable. If he doesn’t like that, he’s defective. Trust me, that won’t mess up your date.”

Van grabs my hand and turns me toward a little cobblestone path that leads to a rose garden. Because, apparently, people at fancy hotels need to be able to walk through rose gardens before their afternoon tea parties or whatever the hell they do.

“What else are you nervous about?” he prompts.

And the dam erupts. Fears overflow and flood my mouth. “I didn’t pack for a date. I have nothing to wear.”

“We can fix that,” Van squeezes my hand, “and I’m sure Akor—”

“Akor is not allowed to steal anything!” I say.

Van laughs. “I’m not telling him that. But you should know, if you decide to tell him, I wouldn’t use the word allowed. Demons don’t like to be told what to do generally, though there is one exception.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“We’ll take orders in bed.”

It takes me a full half-second to process that. And suddenly, I’m picturing myself straddling a shirtless Van, tracing my fingers down his dark red

happy trail, leaning forward to kiss him. And then his face morphs into William's, and what was a hot fantasy becomes a huge, horrid, buzzing pit of anxiety.

“What if I’m a bad kisser!” My cheeks are twin flames, and my head fills with terrifying nightmares of garlic breath and chipped teeth. My last kiss was two years ago at a party with some random guy from Union High. And he didn’t even call me afterwards.

I hadn’t minded at the time, but now my hands fly to my hair. What if he never called because I’m that bad of a kisser?

I start to hyperventilate.

Van puts his hands on my shoulders, but I’m about to go into full on panic attack.

“Katrina, calm down. *Katrina*. Katrina!”

I can’t. I can’t. I need to call a cab. I need to get Adam and call a cab and disappear forever—

Van grabs the back of my neck and slams his lips to mine. He isn’t gentle. He nips at my bottom lip, and that tiny bite startles me. I open my mouth, and his tongue slips inside.

Oh. Oh!

I thought I’d known what a good kiss was, but I was wrong. Van’s kiss makes my mind fizz like a root beer float—it’s bubbly and decadent and delicious. His kiss isn’t naughty. His hands don’t take advantage, like every guy I’ve ever known, but the kiss is so much more intense because of that restraint. He pours all of that passion into just his lips. They brush, they nudge, and his teeth nibble as his hand gently strokes my hair.

I feel dizzy, and my knees are in danger of giving out. I clutch his shoulders and kiss him back for all I’m worth, pouring all of my fear and gratitude into it. Unlike Van, I don’t have the same kind of restraint, so I end up stepping closer and pressing up against him.

When I'm out of breath, I pull away and step back, suddenly shy and embarrassed.

Van's hand is still in my hair, and he gently strokes the back of my neck. "See? You are an amazing kisser." His eyes flash red for a second before he blinks and looks off to the side, muttering sadly, "You have nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about...those words nearly break me. Of course, he was only kissing me to stop me from panicking, to prove that a kiss is no big deal. I'd thought... Well, whatever I'd thought, it was wrong.

A hand slides around my waist and spins me around, out of Van's grip. Akor stares down at me with slightly wild eyes, his mohawk shining an even lighter pink in the moonlight. "No fair. If you kiss him, you have to kiss me too."

And before I can argue, his mouth is on mine. If Van's kiss was an a cappella solo, Akor's kiss is a rock concert. His thumbs trace down the sides of my neck, then tease the undersides of my breasts as he grabs me and pulls me close. He shoves a thigh in between mine, sliding me slowly up as he trails his lips down my neck. Then he bites my earlobe.

"Katty," he whispers.

I'm a panting mess by the time he returns his lips to mine.

I lose all sense of space and time as he continues to devour me.

Only another male voice pulls me back.

"What the hell is this?" Zolroth sounds highly offended.

I jump back from Akor and cover my mouth as my eyes go wide. Zolroth and Raz are both standing there in the garden with disapproving looks on their faces.

"Katrina wasn't feeling confident about her kissing abilities," Van replies, making me slide my hands from my mouth to cover my eyes in abject humiliation.

"Oh really?" Zolroth says.

I feel a set of hands yank down my impromptu blindfold, and I find myself staring up at Zolroth. He shakes his head. “First, you didn’t fake break up with me. Now, I find out you’re practicing kissing with them but not with your fake boyfriend?”

His words are joking, but his eyes aren’t. They look vulnerable, so I’m not sure how to respond.

He doesn’t give me much of a chance because a second later, he’s wrapping an arm around me, dipping me back so that my foot flies up in the air, and plants the world’s softest kiss on my lips. It’s barely a brush of skin, just a delicate butterfly touch, and he’s already pulling away.

That’s it? No, that can’t be it.

Of their own accord, my lips chase after his, and my arms come up to encircle his neck. I pull him down towards me. And together, our kiss becomes a symphony. There are trills, and he pulls my strings as it builds to a crescendo. I even start to hear violins.

When Zolroth finally pulls me back up to my feet, I realize the violin music is real, because Akor’s pulled up some song on his phone and is blasting it in our direction.

“Knock it off,” Zolroth tells him.

Akor swoops in and steals me away, grabbing me by the hand and yanking me close. “I want another round of kissing practice.”

“Raz hasn’t had a turn yet,” Van argues.

I turn to look at Raz, whose horns are fully extended, curling along the sides of his forehead. For some reason, the sight of his horns and the red of his eyes sends heat spiraling down my stomach until it creates an inferno in my core.

His jaw clenches, and his nostrils flare.

And I want him to grab me and just lose control. I want him to hold me down and just take my mouth with his.

But the words that spill out of his mouth are, “I don’t kiss for practice. When I kiss, it’s the real damn thing.”

Then his hand wraps around my upper arm, and he yanks me to him. His hand digs into my ass, and he hitches one of my legs up and wraps my thigh around his waist. I can feel his erection throb against my stomach. And his red eyes are the last thing I see as he dips his head down, before his lips detonate against mine like an atom bomb.



WE LOSE.

Spectacularly.

Honestly, we deserve a trophy just for sucking as badly as we did during the tournament. I'm pretty sure I didn't get one question right, my attention fixated on my upcoming date with William...and the demons.

The memory of their kisses plays on a continuous loop in my head. The tentative, teasing graze of Van's lips. Akor's demanding and possessive kiss. Zolroth's chaste one.

And then Raz's angry, claiming one.

More than once, I find myself touching my lips as a timid smile crawls across my face. But before it can blossom completely, I compress my lips into a stubborn line.

So the demons kissed me. That doesn't mean anything, right? They've probably kissed millions of girls throughout their one hundred plus years on Earth and will continue to do so.

Though...

Why does that thought make me want to hurl? Why do I care what they do and *whom* they do? I tell myself repeatedly that I can't get attached to

them, that they're going to leave soon, but pain still unfurls in my chest anyway.

By the time the tournament ends and we finish in last place, Alanna is glaring daggers at me, Wade is sulking, and even Tim can only manage a sympathetic smile that quickly wavers into a frown. Janie was awful—no surprise—and I wasn't much better. I constantly fucked up the answers in my head, too distracted by...well...everything.

William was a fucking decathlon god up there. I don't think he missed one question. I'm pretty sure every nerd in a twenty-mile radius offered up her panties on a silver platter.

But he didn't choose *those* girls. He chose me.

Me.

Now, the time has arrived. The moment the universe has held its breath for. The beginning of the rest of my life.

And no, I'm not being dramatic. Jeez.

I stare at the dress Akor has "bought" for me. Honestly, I'm surprised he went to the trouble in the first place, considering how pissed they all seem to be with me. I don't understand it.

Shouldn't they be celebrating? For the last few weeks, they've been dealing with a hormonal teenager and her four-year-old brother. They're sexy demons, for fuck's sake, and I know that my integration into their lives is killing their mojo. What normal man—let alone, demon man—would want to play dad to a random kid?

I haven't talked to them since *that* night. You know, the one that involved lips and tongue. Yeah, *that* one. I swear I can still feel their lips on mine like a phantom touch.

You can't be thinking about them, Katrina. You have a date with William. You remember him, right? The love of your pathetic life? Go to your mental shrine and remember how much you love him, dammit!

The hotel room is blissfully empty—Janie left hours ago after a final glare my way, and Alanna went to visit Wade and Tim only a few minutes ago. I'm grateful for the reprieve from their incessant glares, both for entirely different reasons. Apparently, Alanna is a sore loser when she thinks you didn't try hard enough. I'm pretty sure she mentally skinned me alive at least three times already, if her venomous stares are any indication.

Stepping into the bathroom, I slide out of my normal clothes and step into the incredibly soft dress. It's a V-neck lace number that stops just above my knees. Almost as if Akor has a point to prove, it's pure white with intricate flowers detailed into the lace. I look like an angel in it. I look pure and refined...all I need now is a neon sign above my head screaming, "Virgin!"

I keep my pink curls loose before applying some makeup that I was fortunate enough to pack for the trip. Nothing too fancy—just some blush, pink lipstick, eyeliner, and mascara. When I look in the mirror, only an hour later, I feel like an entirely different person.

It's amazing what a little confidence can do for a girl. Before, I would've shrunk my shoulders and attempted to be as small and unassuming as possible. Now, I keep a haughty set to my chin and roll my shoulders back, staring intently at my reflection.

Bring it on, bitch.

At exactly seven o'clock, as we agreed on, there's a hesitant knock on the door.

This is it. My moment. This is my summons wish come true.

Heart thundering like a stampede of wild horses, I grab my purse—a hideous, clunky black bag that I bought at a garage sale a year earlier—and swipe my phone from the dresser.

"Coming!" My voice squeaks painfully, and I quickly clear my throat.

With bated breath, I wrench open the door, practically falling on my face in my excitement.

And there, standing in the doorway, is none other than William Washington.

He wears a button-down shirt with a dark blue tie, one that makes lighter blue flecks appear in his eyes. Those same eyes seem to sparkle when they catch sight of me, and he gives me a slow, appraising once-over.

“Katrina...you look gorgeous,” he praises, flashing me that dimpled grin I love so much. I blush like a fucking idiot.

“So do you,” I blurt, gesticulating wildly at him in all of his perfection. Though...

I can’t help but think how sexy Akor would’ve looked in that outfit.

Not going there.

“Shall we?” William extends an arm for me, and I take it with a grateful smile.

As we move towards the elevator to descend down to the lobby, I swear I feel eyes on the back of my head. But when I turn, heart racing, the hallway is empty.



WILLIAM RESERVED A TABLE AT A FANCY ITALIAN RESTAURANT LOCATED IN the downtown district. It’s only a two-minute walk from the hotel, so we didn’t need to worry about hitching a ride with the demons. You know, the men I kissed passionately just a couple days before. *Those* demons.

When we arrive, the gorgeous brunette hostess takes us to a table near the center of the room, complete with a white tablecloth, candles, and cloth napkins. Honestly, this might make me sound basic as fuck, but I judge a restaurant on whether or not they have real napkins or cloth ones.

“Can I get you guys something to drink to start off?” she asks.

“Pepsi,” William answers before I can.

“Just a water for me, thanks.”

She nods before handing us our menus, explaining the dinner specials, and promising to get our drinks right away. When she leaves, William immediately grabs his menu, a tiny smirk playing at his lips.

“You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“Huh?” I glance down at my own menu, my eyes practically bugging out of my head like some sort of demented cartoon when I see the prices. Thirty dollars for a plate of pasta? Hell to the no.

“You know...” He waves a hand in my direction, still not glancing up from his menu. “I mean, you can eat and drink what you want. I won’t judge you or anything. You don’t need to get a salad and water to please me.”

“Oh.” My cheeks flame as I idly trail my finger up and down the laminated menu. “I was just in the mood for water, I guess,” I say with a sheepish shrug.

“Oh.”

Silence engulfs our table as our waitress returns with our drink orders.

“Thank you,” I say immediately, wrapping my hand around the cold glass. William hesitates when he takes his soda, staring suspiciously at the cup as if it has somehow personally offended him.

“This isn’t diet, is it, sweetheart?” he questions. “Because I don’t drink diet.”

“It’s regular,” she assures him, but his lips still pucker together like he’s eaten something sour. Maintaining eye contact with the waitress, he brings it to his lips and takes a tiny sip. He claps his lips together in contemplation before he nods once.

“You’re right. My apologies.”

Plastering on a rather fake smile, she says, “Are you guys ready to order?”

William smiles charmingly at me before focusing once more on the waitress. “We’ll both take an order of the Italian Pasta Alla Checca,” he declares, grabbing my menu from my hands and extending both of them to

the woman. “One tab, please.” He flashes me another disarming smile as the waitress hurries away to put our orders in.

“The Italian Pasta Alla Checca?” I say with a nervous laugh. “I didn’t even see it on the menu.”

“Trust me. You’ll love it,” he assures me with a wink.

“Oh. Great. Thanks.”

Awkward silence ensues as William continues smirking at me like the cat with the cream—or is it the cream with the cat?—and I shift on the chair. When our waitress returns with a basket of bread, I’m grateful for something to do with my hands, practically shoving a stick into my mouth while William’s nose scrunches with disgust.

“You don’t like bread?” I ask around my first bite.

William purses his lips. “It’s a lot of carbs to have with pasta,” he explains, and I instantly feel stupid for devouring one in the first place.

You’re on a date, Katrina. Have some fucking class!

I tentatively place my breadstick on the edge of my plate and clasp my hands together.

“So…”

“So…”

“That decathlon tournament was a bust, right?” I take a sip of my water when my throat becomes unbearably dry.

“Embarrassing,” William agrees, leveling me with a half-teasing, half-annoyed look. “Did you not study the night before?”

I gag on the water.

“I mean, I did…”

“It’s okay.” He smiles once more. “I’ll study with you next time, if you want.”

Struggling to refill my lungs with air, I drop the water glass and slowly unroll the silverware just so I have something to do with my hands.

“I didn’t know you were so good with facts,” I admit, watching him through my fringe of lashes. “You must have a really good memory.”

“It’s all about who you know,” William replies vaguely, but his attention has already dropped...to my lips. Is...?

Is William Washington thinking about kissing me?

Desire heats his eyes as he places his elbows on the table, leaning forward.

My eyes flicker down to his lips as memories of my kissing training rush to me. The stubble on Van’s chin...

Akor’s punishing grip on my waist...

Zolroth’s—

“Katty!”

I jump a foot in the air at the sound of my brother’s voice, instantly pulling away from a disappointed William. I glance over my shoulder just in time to see Adam barreling towards me, arms already extended.

“Adam,” I gasp in alarm, “what are you doing here?”

“We’re having a loser dinner!” Adam exclaims eagerly. “Razzy said that since the team sucked so bad, we have to have one.” I stare over his shoulder where the man himself strides in with the rest of the decathlon team. Zolroth, Van, Akor, and Kastros stand at the back of the makeshift group, spewing acid at William with their eyes.

“Excuse me, waitress!” Raz waves his hand to capture the brunette’s attention, and her eyes light up when she catches sight of him.

“Yes,” she practically purrs, all but running towards him.

Raz nods towards the large round table directly beside us, easily able to fit the entire group.

“Do you mind if we sit here?” He flashes her a radiant smile, one that doesn’t reach his eyes, as she glances towards the entryway currently teeming with waiting customers.

“Do you have a reservation?” she asks softly, still batting those abnormally long lashes at him.

He leans forward until his mouth is directly beside her ear, speaking too low for me to hear. Jealousy unfurls in my gut like a poisonous flower as she giggles, nodding once.

“Of course. Give me a second to grab you guys silverware and menus.” She sashays away, a ridiculous sway to her hips, but Raz is already focused on me and William.

“I didn’t expect to see you guys here!” he says with a wide smile. A way too wide smile. He sort of looks like a fucked up clown, but without the makeup, wig, or clown outfit. So, a sexy clown. A sexy, devilish clown.

“Yeah.” William reaches across the table to place his hand on mine, and Raz’s eyes smolder. “We’re on a date.”

“A date?” Adam murmurs, backing away from me with a frown firmly in place. He glances between me and William before shifting his gaze to the demons. “I don’t want you to date him. I want you to date *them*.”

“Who’s...this?” William asks in distaste as his eyes rove over Adam and dismiss him. Irritation slices through me before I can tamp it down. He’s probably annoyed that our date got interrupted, not that I blame him. Besides, he doesn’t know yet that Adam is my little brother.

“Adam,” I introduce, nudging my little brother forward. “He’s my kid brother.”

“You brought your brother with you?” he asks in obvious disbelief.

Ignoring him, I focus on Raz, still hovering over our table.

“What are you doing here?” I ask through clenched teeth. “How did the school even agree to pay for all of this?”

“As Adam said, we decided to treat the team to dinner to...commemorate their loss.” He offers me a tight-lipped smile, though his eyes still emanate a red-hot rage. “And as for your second question, Zolroth is paying for it, just as he’s paying for the hotel. Only the best for...” He trails off with a pointed look at me before releasing a bark of dry laughter.

But my mind is still stuck on his declaration. Zolroth paid for us to be in a fancy hotel? For me?

Before I can voice one of the numerous thoughts in my head, Raz continues, “But isn’t it just the strangest coincidence that we ended up at the same place?” He laughs hollowly before claiming a seat at the end of his table, only a few feet away from me. “I think it’s fate.”

“Fate is an abstract illusion that implies that free will doesn’t exist,” Wade pipes up, using his middle finger to push his glasses back into place.

“Don’t be so emo, fucker,” Alanna huffs from the seat beside him.

“...Zolroth,” Janie’s nasally voice captures my attention, “I didn’t expect you to come.” I spin my head so fast that I get whiplash, just in time to see her place a hand on his muscular forearm. “I had no idea that you were cousins with Kastros and Mr. D. But I’m happy you’re here...” When she lowers her hand to his thigh, I see red.

“Katrina?” William snaps his fingers in my face to redirect my attention back to him. Irritation distorts his traditionally handsome features before he closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and adopts a happy grin once more. “Were you listening to me?”

It’s official—I’m on a date from Hell.



I CAN'T FOCUS on William.

The love of my life is attempting to engage me in conversation, but my traitorous eyes keep flickering to the table beside ours.

Alanna is angrily snapping at Kastros for the way he “allowed them to fail.” Her words, not mine. Van is sitting with his back to me, arms crossed over his chest as he reclines. Even from this distance, I can practically taste the pheromones he emits as the pretty waitress repeatedly tries to capture his attention. At one point, she goes as far as to undo the first few buttons of her white shirt, but his attention never strays from the bread basket. I wish I could see his expression—what is he thinking? Does he *want* this woman’s attention?

Raz is still scowling at the end of the table, looking unreasonably handsome in his dress shirt and khaki pants. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him out of jeans and a T-shirt before, so I allow my eyes to wander unashamedly over his perfect physique.

And Akor...

He’s glaring at our table, one of his hands gripping his butter knife while the other clenches around his steak knife. He has his cloth napkin tucked into the collar of his shirt, and the crazy bastard isn’t even blinking as he levels William with such a ferocious, incandescent glare that a lesser man

would've shit himself. Hell, I'm not even on the receiving end of it, and I kind of want to pee my pants.

As I watch, transfixed, he begins to stab at his breadstick with his butter knife before using his steak knife to pantomime cutting his own throat. Through it all, his eyes bore holes into William's oblivious profile.

"...and I said, 'I don't know if I can believe that.'" William laughs enthusiastically at his own joke, and I muster a weak one of my own. Honestly, I haven't heard any of his story, but it's better to pretend and feign laughter than admit the truth.

"That's...funny." I take another sip of my water before stabbing my fork into the pasta dish William ordered for me. It's...okay, I guess. Not something I would normally get. I much prefer plain dishes instead of fancy-ass meals that seem to be trying too hard.

If William notices how distracted I've become, he doesn't comment on it. He actually doesn't comment on anything besides himself.

Huh.

How come I never realized how self-absorbed he was?

Maybe because you've been blinded by your feelings for him, a snide voice jibes in my head.

It's like I've been looking at William through rose-tinted glasses, the color designed to make everything even more beautiful and ethereal in appearance. Only now, the glasses have been removed, allowing me to see what has always been in front of my face. And the real William? I don't like him very much.

The warm and fuzzies which once resided in my stomach whenever I looked at him are nowhere to be seen. I can't even muster the usual healthy dose of lust I've felt since middle school. Sure, I can admit he's handsome in a preppy-boy kind of way, but he doesn't make my heart palpitate and my blood race.

Not anymore.

“...you’re so funny,” Janie coos, and my hand tightens on the fork when, out of the corner of my eye, I watch her put her spindly fingers once more on Zolroth’s thigh. He immediately dispatches them, a frown marring his beautiful face, before laughing slightly.

“It wasn’t a joke, love,” he murmurs, his British accent causing her to practically swoon.

Love?

Love?!?

Why the fuck is he calling her love?

I know it’s a British term of endearment, but...it’s a freaking British term of *endearment*! How has Janie *endeared* herself to him?

Before I can jump from the table, charge over there, and rip Janie’s hand from her arm, I feel the metal prongs of a fork against my lips. I whip my head back in William’s direction to see him smiling slyly at me.

“Open up,” he whispers in what he probably thinks is a seductive purr, but all I can think about is how unsanitary it is to use the same fork.

Hesitantly, I open my mouth, and he shoves the bite of pasta inside of it before slowly, languidly, pulling it back out.

But come the fuck on.

He has the exact same meal as I do.

“What do you think?” William asks, reclining in his seat and swirling his soda in the glass cup.

“It tastes like...my food,” I murmur awkwardly as I dab at my lips with the napkin. I’m pretty sure William got more on my face than in my mouth. And if he has that bad of aim...

Well...

I can’t imagine the lower half will be any better.

Another one of Janie's high-pitched giggles has me seeing green. And red. Sort of like Christmas colors. A fucking Christmas combination of *jealousy and rage*.

I don't even understand half of the emotions running unbridled inside of me. Why am I feeling like this? I should be over the moon that I'm on a date with William, not obsessing over every interaction my fake ex-boyfriend has with my enemy.

And yet...

And yet my eyes are drawn to the five demons like heat-seeking missiles. Try as I might, they're never far from the forefront of my mind, demanding my complete and utter attention. These fucking beautiful, damaged, broken men.

Mine.

That word seeps into my very bones—into my soul—and I nearly choke on the sheer rightness of it.

I know I shouldn't feel this way, but somewhere amidst the chaos of the last couple weeks, my feelings for the demons have shifted. The emotion thumping my heart is similar to the one I once felt when I was with William. But stronger. Brighter. Even more heartbreakingly beautiful.

Oh my God.

I'm struck speechless with the enormity of my feelings and the crippling realization that I fucked things up marvelously.

"Who wants to see a magic trick?" Akor announces suddenly, and the various patrons in the restaurant turn to give him their undivided attention. There's something about his magnetic, infectious personality that reels people in. Or it could just be because he's bat-shit crazy and currently standing on his chair, holding three knives in his hand.

With a deranged laugh, one that causes goosebumps to erupt on my skin, he begins to juggle the knives while humming softly.

“Zolroth?” Akor grins manically down at the materialism demon, who sighs heavily. Procuring a quarter from his tweed jacket’s pocket, Zolroth holds it up for Akor’s inspection. “Heads, you hand me another knife. Tails, I stab one of these knives into William’s neck.”

The people in hearing range begin to laugh, even William, no doubt believing it’s a joke.

It’s most definitely not.

Zolroth throws the coin up in the air and captures it on the back of his hand.

My heart constricts as that tiny coin flips through the air and then falls. I can’t look.

Zolroth almost looks disappointed when he murmurs, “Heads.”

“Damn,” Van growls, sulking.

Zolroth nods to a wide-eyed Wade, who hesitantly tosses his own steak knife at a still-grinning Akor. He catches it easily, never breaking his... juggling circle, or whatever the hell it’s called.

“I’m doing this for you, Kitty Kat!” Akor winks in my direction, but it’s suddenly too much.

My feelings, these men, my date with William.

It’s too fucking much, and I’m drowning in the emotions all of them have somehow evoked in me.

“Excuse me,” I murmur half-heartedly to William as I fly from the table and in the direction of the bathrooms. Tears slip down my cheeks as I struggle to get a grip on my tumultuous heart.

What the hell is happening to me?

It feels as if thousands of dime-sized ice pellets are being tossed at me from all directions, bruising my skin. All I want is to get away, to take a moment to compartmentalize this sudden surge of *feeling*.

Fuck feelings. Seriously, fuck ’em.

But before I can retreat into the ladies' restroom, a large body blocks my entrance, and I stare up into the harsh planes of Kastros's face. His expression is utterly unreadable, hewn from stone, as he crosses his thick arms over his chest.

Tears blind my vision as I blink rapidly up at him. "I think I made a mistake," I whimper, but I can't put my finger on what that mistake is. Going on a date with William? Hurting the demons' feelings? Everything? My sins and transgressions are piling up on me like dirt buries a coffin. I'm six feet deep and trapped.

The tension in the hall is so thick I'm gagging on it.

You did, Kastros signs, expression still impassive, and my heart plummets, bottoming through my stomach.

And then, he breaches the distance between us and kisses me.

His lips are smooth against my own as his teeth gently nip then tug on my lips, taking, taking, and taking. I give in with a sigh of longing, standing on my tiptoes so I can wrap my arms around his neck. Of course, he's so freaking tall that I settle for resting them on his strong shoulders, enjoying the way his muscles ripple beneath my wandering hands.

He fists my hair and angles my head to the side, moving his lips to the very sensitive spot below my ear.

Another tiny sigh of contentment escapes me as his hands lower to my ass, pressing me flush against his hard body. And his other *hard* thing.

Someone gasps from behind me, and we immediately pull apart to see Alanna staring at us with wide eyes. The confusion on her face turns into white-hot anger, so pronounced that I can practically taste it in the air. With a glare first in my direction and then in Kastros's, she turns on her heel and stalks away.

Oh fuck.



I THOUGHT the hotel room was bad when Janie was mad at me. But when Alanna's mad, it's ten times worse. Her fury is so incandescent, it practically lights up the entire room.

Going back to William after I'd kissed Kastros was complete and utter torture. Because I realized I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be at his table. I wanted to be at the next table over, with my demons.

My demons. How ridiculous. They have a Center somewhere who's perfect for them, and I'm over here pining. Me. A pathetic human. It's even more awful than pining over William because it's five times as impossible.

I drag my feet across the hotel room and climb into bed without making eye contact. I close my eyes, but I don't dare fall asleep. Janie might not be as pissed as before, because I cut my date short with William. When I came back to the table, I was pale and my hands were shaking. All the blood had fled my face and gone...other places.

"I think I'm coming down with something," I'd told him.

His eyes had flashed with surprise, a hint of annoyance, and then finally, had changed to a smirking wink. "Let me just grab the check," he'd said.

He'd actually thought I was faking so we could get out of there.

I had been faking so I could get out of there, but not *with him*.

Raz had saved me from a fate worse than death, growling at William and telling him that only chaperones could escort ill students, and he should stay with the team and away from me to ensure he didn't get sick too.

Raz had risen from the table, where Akor had gotten to juggling nine knives. And he'd walked me back to my room just like a proper guardian would. Just as if the air hadn't swirled with anticipation and my eyes hadn't darted to his with longing every two seconds.

Nothing had happened. No conversation about feelings or William. No lectures. Not even the angry yelling I expected from him. Not unless you counted Raz's parting line at my door. "I'll see you soon."

What. The. Hell?

I punch my pillow, pretending to reshape it, but really I'm just getting out some aggression. Yeah, he'll see me on the damn drive home. In, like, six hours, because he and Kastros are assholes and told us that we were going to leave at five AM.

Fury fills me, and I want to kick myself. I should have asked him if I could ride home in the other car. Why didn't I ask that? It would have been a perfect solution; it would fulfill my new life strategy to avoid William Washington at all costs.

I'm an idiot. But we all knew that, right?

I think again about Kastros's kiss. I wish it hadn't been interrupted. I wish he could have shoved me up against the wall, and I could have ground against him.

I wish...

I wish...

I suddenly find myself walking through the cloud meadow, and for the first time, I feel a sense of wistfulness while I'm here. Like I'm missing something.

I'm on a hill in the meadow that's a little removed from everything else. It's not my normal spot near the friendly baby clouds. It feels bigger, more

empty, and a bit more ominous.

When I turn and look behind me, the hills of cloud stretch as far as the eye can see, like the dunes of a vast white desert. There are no gardens, no creations, just the steady rise and fall of dense white masses that have peaks and valleys like whipped meringue. Just past those dunes, I can see a ribbon of red, as though a fiery sunset lurks beneath those clouds.

But then he arrives. Ziel walks out from behind a massive, slate grey thunderhead. Tonight, he's tall and his skin is a rich dark gold. His head is shaved bald, and his dark eyebrows rise when he sees me. His signature red cape streaks out behind him as he runs towards me.

Suddenly, my heart feels complete.

Is my conscience telling me that I'm good because I finally accepted the feelings I've been fighting for the demons? Or is my heart trying to tell me that loving the demons is just as dreamily unrealistic as loving Ziel?

My questions cease a moment later, when Ziel scoops me up and spins me in a circle. I start to laugh, but his lips on my neck quickly change that laugh to a gasp.

He pulls back and stares down at me. "Katrina Colt, I've been waiting for you for what feels like an eternity." He brings his fingers up to trace my cheek, and I lean into his gentle touch. "You're perfect," he whispers.

My thoughts become as wispy and incoherent as a cirrus cloud. I reach my hand up to his jawline, studying his new face. Tonight, he has prominent cheekbones and warm brown eyes. But it's not his appearance I love; it never has been. It's the warm feeling I get from being with him.

I push up onto my tiptoes, and my lips seal against his. And it feels like a sun forms inside of me. I grow warm and light and bright from the inside out. I whimper because it feels so amazing that I can't hold all of that brilliant, glowing heat inside of me.

"Katrina." He whispers my name again before his lips retrace their path along my neck. When he reaches the base of my neck, his tongue traces over my collarbones, and I'm startled by how intense and amazing that feels.

His hands slide slowly around my neck and down my back. And it's only then that I realize that my dream self is wearing a backless halter dress. His fingers trace over my sensitive skin, and I think I might float away.

I grab onto him so that he can keep me grounded, but when my hands dig into Ziel's shoulders, it seems to spur him on and change the intensity of his movements. His hands stop stroking my back and instead, slide down and dig into my ass. He pulls my cheeks apart slightly as he grips the silky dress, and for some reason, that makes me wild.

I spread my legs and shove my body at his, finding his thigh and grinding down against it as I lock our lips together.

Ziel scoops me up all the way into his arms, wrapping my legs around his back, and then gently goes down to his knees with me in his arms. He lays me back in the clouds, and there I am, spread open beneath him.

And unlike how the real Katrina would be, dream me is completely unafraid. I know exactly what I want. I smile up at him as I reach slowly behind my neck and undo the knot that holds this silky, silver fabric on top of my skin.

This has been coming for a long time. It feels inevitable. It feels like fate.

I slowly pull down the straps of my gown.

His eyes grow wide, and he swallows hard. Seeing the effect I have on him, knowing he has the exact same effect on me, catapults me out of my normal headspace and into a universe where he's beautiful and I'm beautiful and everything is utterly breathtaking.

"I need to worship you," Ziel whispers.

He leans down, and I can feel his hot breath trace over my skin. It's such a contrast to the cool, soft clouds at my back. My skin feels utterly alive, and every nerve ending is activated. His fingertips trace lightly down my sides and then gently tug the dress I'm wearing down to my hips. I lift them and am just as surprised as he is to discover that dream me isn't wearing panties.

“I think my mind must have been ready for you when I fell asleep,” I say with a grin.

“I like the way your mind works.” He smiles before lowering his head and gently tracing his lips over the swells of my breasts. My hands immediately fly to the back of his head and the smooth, shaved skin there.

He kisses around my breasts and then down my stomach to my belly button.

Anticipation has me tensing. I want him to touch me more. I want him to touch me everywhere. But at the same time, I never want this to end. I don’t want to wake up. I want to kiss Ziel and feel his lips forever.

He lets his palms drag up and down my thighs gently. Their rough texture is magical. It’s just a hint of masculine grit combined with the gentleness of his touch, and my thighs fall open in placid pleasure and invitation.

Ziel moves back up to capture my mouth, and we kiss deeply.

I trace my fingertips down the side of his neck and pull back to smile as I say, “Did you know that no matter what you look like, your laugh sounds the same?”

“Does it?” Ziel smiles in amusement, his voice a rough rasp.

He leans down, and with a naughty grin, he drags his tongue over my nipple. I arch up, the sensation so unfamiliar and intense. He does it again on the other side and then latches on, sucking gently.

I’ve never felt anything like this. I don’t know how to respond to the stars sparking behind my eyelids or the ribbons of sensation that dance through me. I end up gasping, clawing at the clouds beneath me, which shred in a way that leaves me wishing for bed sheets I could clutch.

Ziel doesn’t just use his mouth though. He brings up his hand and tweaks my other nipple, the pain contrasting the gentle suction of his lips. I arch up into him, wrapping my arms around the back of his neck and begging, “More.”

His free hand slides between my legs and finds me damp, ready. He swirls his finger in tender circles around my most sensitive spot, and I start to float away. My mind detaches from reality and enters a space that's both primal and ethereal.

"Ziel." I growl his name, aggression taking over, need burning so brightly behind my eyelids that all I see is red.

His finger slides over my clit. And I howl, lost to sensation, as he pleasures me again and again, his magical fingers tapping against that sensitive bundle of nerves, sliding away, then tapping once more.

I buck against his hand, reaching down and clutching his forearm, as if I'm afraid he might take it away. I hold it steady as my hips writhe against his fingers, and together, we find the most brilliant pleasure God ever created.

When my orgasm ends, he releases me gently, leaning over me as I dazedly blink and stare up at him in lust-drunk awe. That was amazing. But I still, somehow, want more.

"Ziel," I whisper up at him. "Be my first."

Tears fill his eyes as he nods. He doesn't say a word, just leans down and gives me a tiny peck on the lips before I feel his fingers spreading me apart. He slowly pushes one finger inside of me, opening me up to him. He pumps it back and forth, letting me adjust to it, before adding a second. That's when he starts to curl his fingers and slide them gently over my G-spot.

My eyes nearly roll back in my head. I've touched myself plenty of times before, even been on a few dates that got close to home plate, but nothing has *ever* felt like this.

My neck arches back, and I moan, staring up at a sky that's suddenly full of pure white feathers drifting down like tiny propellers, spinning and softly landing on the clouds all around us.

"What ...?" I trail off as Ziel removes his fingers and leaves me bereft.

"Where do you think angel wings come from?" he asks me as he lines himself up with my entrance. "The feathers form when a heart feels pure,

true love.” A tear drips from his eye and lands on my cheek.

Awe. I have no words but “awe.”

He pushes into me and starts to stroke softly. At first, it aches, and disappointment fills me. But Ziel caresses my cheek and kisses me. I focus on his kiss until, after a while, the pain recedes, and instead, a heat builds inside of me.

As though he can read my mind, the moment it begins to feel good, Ziel pulls back and studies my face. “Better?” he whispers.

I nod. And then he makes it even better than it was by sliding a hand down between us and stroking my clit. He pumps slowly and steadily, propped up on one forearm while the other hand builds my pleasure. When my thighs start to quiver, he increases his pace, thrusting faster, tightening the circles made by his finger.

When he lightly pinches my clit, I scream, pleasure sliding over my thoughts, quelling my mind like an eclipse, like the moon blocking the sun.

Ziel moans his satisfaction moments later, then collapses on top of me so that we’re pressed chest to chest. He stays there for a moment, and I enjoy the feel of his rapidly thudding chest, his warmth, before he rolls off to one side and then gathers me close with an arm.

His eyes study mine carefully. “Did I hurt you?”

I shake my head. “It was perfect.”

Tears fill my eyes, because it was perfect. But also, because I know that it was just a perfect dream.



I NEARLY DIE of embarrassment on the drive home, because that sex dream I had? Apparently, it was a loud one.

Alanna and Janie tell everyone about it. It's the prime gossip in the van.

William gets smug, thinking the dream is about him. His hand keeps wandering to my thigh, and eventually, I have to put my backpack on my lap just to get him to stop.

Wade, Darrel, and Tim keep making moaning noises in my direction. Kastros has a death grip on the steering wheel for nearly the entire drive.

The only person who doesn't give me either a death stare or a hard time about it is Raz. He's too busy staring out the window, probably wondering if the terms of their summons are technically fulfilled so they can move on to the next thing.

That thought makes me feel like I've been cleaved in two. I avoid it by thinking instead about every question I got wrong at the tournament, because honestly, that disappointment is nothing in comparison.

When we arrive back at school, I finally feel like I can breathe. Until William says he'll text me so we can "finish our date."

I just stare at him like a rabbit, hoping that if I don't move, he magically won't be able to see me. He just winks and walks off.

As soon as everyone's gone, I'm nervous again, because all the demons are sending me sideways glances when they think I'm not looking.

We're going to have to discuss those kisses. And I don't know what I should say about it. Should I beg them to stay? Should I act like it was nothing so they can go off and find their Center, the woman they're truly supposed to be with?

It feels like too much pressure, so I simply stick like glue to Adam's side, hoping that the presence of a four-year-old will dissuade any grown-up style discussions, because I'm not feeling grown-up enough to have them at the moment.

"So, we need to go pick up Jason," Akor says casually.

I'd completely forgotten about him. "Where is he?" I ask. What do you do with a grown-ass, football player-sized zombie when you go out of town? Are there supernatural zombie kennels?

"We had Dajiel and his murder watch him."

I remember the quadruplets, but I couldn't tell you which one Dajiel was if I had to pick him out of a line up.

"Do we get to go to their house?" Adam jumps up and down next to me.

"Do they have toys? What kind of toys? Can I play with them?"

Akor grabs Adam around the waist, and then uses his forearm as a bar and flings my brother in a full circle around his arm. Adam squeals as he flips like a gymnast. "Again!" he cries immediately.

"Tell you what, if we get there and they don't have toys, I'll flip you some more." Akor winks.

"Deal. Let's go right now!" Adam scrambles back into his carseat.

I have to admit, it's a good way to get a four-year-old back into the car after he's already ridden six hours.

I hurry into the seat right next to Adam so that I don't have to talk to any of the demons on our drive over. Instead, I listen as Adam tells me about his drive and every red truck he saw in mind-numbing detail.

When we get to the other demons' lair—I can't help calling it that in my head—I find that it's the complete opposite of the guys' place. This place is posh. It's a penthouse apartment in the swanky part of town. I have to try not to kink my neck staring at all the sculptures in the lobby.

Adam, it appears, is equally fascinated by them. “Why do they have all these naked mannequins?” he asks as we pile into the elevator.

“Good question,” Raz rumbles as he stands next to me.

His body heat and cologne make every nerve ending in my body go on high-alert. And when his hand reaches down and subtly strokes the back of mine, I nearly jump because I'm so startled.

What's gotten into him? Or is he warning me? Were the naked people only level one of the demon-crazy here? Is it going to get worse? Does Adam need a blindfold?

I'm not really sure what my thoughts are doing, other than frantically trying to avoid the things I really need to think about.

We exit the elevator on the top floor, and Kastros uses a golden knocker to bang on the door. It swings open only a second later to reveal a demon that I've never seen before. This isn't one of the quadruplets; this demon has ebony skin and the most gorgeous caramel eyes I've ever seen. He's not wearing a shirt, and his nipples stand proud and tempting on top of pecs that could only be unnatural, they're so perfect. Without meaning to, I find myself stepping toward him.

Van grabs my forearm and gently pulls me back. “Kat, slow down. Dajiel, can you turn off the lust please?”

I shake my head to try to clear it and look over at Van. “That's not Dajiel.”

He laughs. “Yes, it is. Tatrysts is a bit of a prick and loves to use his illusion powers to confuse people. Making all of the males in their murder look the same is one of his favorites.”

I remember the karaoke demon and nod. “Oh. Didn't realize that. But that will make it far easier to tell you all apart now.” I turn back to Dajiel with a friendly smile.

His return grin is a bit tight, probably because he doesn't like Van telling him what to do. To ease the tension, I say, "Thanks so much for watching Jason for us. I know Adam's missed him."

"Yeah! Where's my zombie-man-dog?" Adam asks.

"People? Are those my people?" Jason comes barreling out the door, shoving past Dajiel and then doing jazz hands as he jumps up and down in excitement.

Are jazz hands the human equivalent of tail wags? I wonder.

My deep thought is interrupted when Dajiel invites us in.

We walk into their apartment, Jason carrying Adam and giving him Eskimo kisses, and I'm immediately awed, just like I was downstairs, but also a little bit horrified. Except for a golden-hued wooden floor, everything in the entire apartment is white. Even the stones for the magical stone pit and the column of fire (they seem to be a supernatural demon staple) are white here instead of red.

How do they not spill anything?

Dajiel gestures toward the couches. "Take a seat. Everyone else is out... running errands and whatnot. Anyone want a drink?"

The guys all say they'll take some lemonade, and Dajiel disappears for a second, re-emerging with a pitcher and glasses that look like they're made of carved crystal and belong in a museum.

I so do not belong in this place.

Adam has no such qualms. He and Jason are soon jumping on a white couch, and I have to hurry over and hiss at him not to ruin the furniture.

"Relax," Dajiel waves them off. "They're fine. Breaking rules is good for them."

The front door bursts open. Arariel struts inside, shaking out her wings and carrying a paper grocery sack. "I'm so glad that—" She stops mid-sentence when she sees us, surprise lighting up her face. "Ooh, visitors! Let me just go toss this head in the fridge."

“Head?” Jason perks up.

She wags a finger at him. “None for you, silly. You’re going home.”

Jason pouts, but she doesn’t listen, just sashays through the room and into the kitchen. When she’s back a minute later with a blood-red drink in her hand, I’m hesitant to ask what it is.

Yeah, I’m squeamish about it, okay?

Dajiel challenges the guys to a round of darts down in the pit, and they all immediately spread their wings and fly down. Guys and competition.

Arariel comes over and sits down next to me. She puts a hand on my thigh, squeezing. “So, how are you?”

I shrug. “I’m alright,” I lie as Jason and Adam run down the hallway toward the bedrooms, giggling. I would have been nervous, but Akor’s told me at least five times that once Jason imprints on those he considers family, he’ll never harm them.

“No, really. Tell me,” she coos.

I sigh and turn toward her. “I’m confused. What can you tell me about Centers?” I ask her, because it seems better than asking the guys and hearing them talk more about their fated mate. I feel like asking them would be like tearing out my heart and setting it on top of an operational deli slicer.

Arariel tilts her head and her lips get even more pouty as she thinks. “Well, a Center is the fated mate of a flock of angels or a murder of demons.”

“But they’re a liability too, right?” I ask quietly, leaning close because I’m desperate for information but also definitely do not want to be overheard.

She nods. “Yes. Normally, demons and angels can’t be hurt, much less killed. But whenever they’re around their Center, all bets are off. The Center is a weakness, a liability, a way to restore balance and remove any flocks or murders that have grown too powerful.”

I suck in a breath. So I was right. My demons have a fated mate. And she's also the reason they're getting hurt. My insides war over keeping them for myself so that they can't get hurt and letting them go because that's the way it's meant to be.

I don't know if Arariel can sense my inner turmoil when she leans close and whispers in my ear, "Centers are actually the most hated beings in all creation. Imagine another person making you weak, susceptible to death. Most murders kill their Center the second they find them."

I draw back in horror.

"They what?"

She gives a casual shrug as she drinks down more of her blood-red liquid. "We did. Our Center's been dead for centuries." She gives me a wink. "Why do you think we fell from Heaven?"

I lean back against the couch cushions, feeling young and small and shocked to my core.

So if I send my demons off to their mate, they'll just kill her?



“DIE, MOTHERFUCKER!” I hiss through gritted teeth as I jerk the controller back, glaring at the television screen. Firing the shotgun Van procured for me at an abandoned cabin, I watch the zombie’s head explode like a watermelon at the end of a baseball bat. “Aww, shit,” I curse as a second zombie swipes at my character’s head. “Zolroth! I need health!”

Zolroth makes a noise on the couch beside me, too focused on the game to actually use his words.

A moment later, his avatar on the screen fixes me up, using the last of our combined health supplies.

“You know,” Akor begins casually as his player fires off a huge bazooka at the rapidly approaching throng of zombies, “this is much more fun with real zombies. Did you know that in Hell, they have an abandoned ghost town filled with creatures like Jason? We could play this for real!” He’s practically bouncing on the edge of his seat as Zolroth throws a pillow in his direction.

“Shut the bloody fuck up, Akor, and take my rear,” he instructs, and of course, Akor waggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“Why, you sly dog...”

Van chooses that moment to reappear, throwing himself over the back of the couch and resuming his seat beside me.

“Adam asleep?” I query as Van rejoins the game.

“Out like a light,” he answers, frowning when he sees how fucked we are. Seriously, there are zombies *everywhere*. I blame Akor for stupidly setting off the car alarm.

“And Kastros and Raz?” I press anxiously. The two of them were called away to go check out a flock of angels rumored to be in the vicinity. That was two fucking hours ago, and they still haven’t returned. To say I’m stressed would be an understatement. What if something’s happened to them? What if that bitch, their Center, was around? What if she caused them to get hurt? I’m quite certain I would string her up and gut her innards, fated mate or not.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. A little psycho-sounding, maybe, but I can’t find it within me to care. Maybe Akor is rubbing off on me. Or Arariel. Who knows? All I know is that it’s been two days since we got back from the tournament, and I have reconciled with the fact that Centers are not good for murders. I might have a slight, tiny, minuscule personal interest in their particular Center dying.

“They’re fine.” Van heaves out a heavy breath, his nose scrunching adorably as he focuses on the game. “Stop stressing, Katrina, or else your pretty pink hair will turn gray.”

I scowl and bring one hand up to my head instinctively.

“Yeah? Well, your face will turn *wrinkly*,” I snap back, because yeah, I’m just that smooth.

Van quirks one russet eyebrow, a witty retort no doubt on the tip of his tongue, but before he can speak, the door is kicked open and it smashes into the wall behind it with a *thud*. Raz staggers inside, Kastros’s bloody, unconscious form draped over his shoulder.

No. My heart hits the floor just as hard as the door hit the wall.

“Holy shit!” I jump to my feet instantly as Zolroth and Akor race forward, taking Kastros from Raz and setting him gently on the floor. Van remains by my side, one hand on my shoulder as if he means to protect me from whatever or whomever did this to them, or else to restrain me.

“What happened?” Zolroth’s accent is thicker than ever before as he hovers over his friend.

This close, I can see Kastros’s face is mottled with black and blue bruises, each one more pronounced than the last. Both of his eyes are almost completely swollen shut, and his arm hangs at an unnatural angle.

Raz isn’t looking much better, though unlike his friend, he’s still able to stand. Hideous gashes mar his beautiful face, and dried blood clumps his sandy blond hair to the side of his scalp. Pain radiates from his eyes as he hisses out a breath, slowly lowering himself to the nearest armchair.

“Angels,” he answers bitterly, pain causing his face to crease. “We thought it would be simple surveillance, but they were expecting us. I don’t know how they even knew we were coming. Five against two. They got us from behind. And with...” He trails off, throwing his head back and closing his eyes.

“Is it because of your Center?” I ask hesitantly, volleying my gaze between a still unconscious Kastros and a grimacing Raz. As if my body has a will of its own, I lower myself to my knees beside Kastros’s humongous form and take his hand in mine. I swear his eyes are moving rapidly behind his closed eyelids as he tilts his face in my direction, almost as if he can’t help himself. “Are you vulnerable because of your Center?”

When none of the guys answer my question, choosing instead to exchange wary looks, I swallow down the sudden lump in my throat.

“It is because of her, isn’t it? She’s causing you guys to get injured, when before, you would’ve been perfectly fine.” My conversation with Arariel comes to the forefront of my mind, and I find myself voicing something I never thought I would say. Something so unimaginable that I feel physically ill just for even thinking it. “Maybe you should take care of the problem.”

Did I really just suggest that the guys *kill* their fucking Center? What the hell is wrong with me?

All I know with vivid clarity is that I won’t be able to live with myself if anything happens to these guys. Call me dramatic or young or whatever

you want to, but in the short time I have known them, they have imprinted themselves on my very soul. Embedded themselves into my genetic makeup.

And seeing Kastros covered in a myriad of hideous bruises? It only solidifies the fact that I can't lose them. I refuse to. It's completely selfish—probably the most selfish thing I've ever done in my life—but I'll do whatever it takes to keep these demons alive and well.

My demons.

“Are you seriously suggesting what I think you are?” Zolroth's voice is rife with heady disbelief.

“M-Maybe you guys should leave,” I stammer out. “Go back to Hell, or whatever. It's obviously not safe for you here. We don't know where the she-demon is, and—”

“Katrina,” Raz all but growls, sitting up straighter in his chair and leveling me with an unreadable look.

“—I need you guys to be safe. I can't stand to see you hurt.” Tears emerge in my eyes as I stroke Kastros's cheek—the one part that's not covered in bruises or scratches.

“Katrina!” This time, Raz's voice reminds me of thunder disrupting the night's tranquility. I whip my head around to face him, and I can't help but note how tired he suddenly looks. How broken. Vulnerability peeks back at me before he shoves the emotion away, expression turning impassive.

“Katrina, there's something you need to know.”

“What?” I demand, scrambling to my feet. I feel like this is a “stand and glare” type of conversation instead of “kneel and weep.” “Seriously, what?”

None of the guys will even look at me. Van glares at the far wall, lips tense, and Akor shoves a hand through his pink mohawk, causing the strands to become wildly disheveled. Zolroth looks physically pained as he stares intently at my face, almost as if he wishes to memorize it.

“You’re our Center,” Raz confesses at last, and I swear you could hear a pin drop in the silence that follows. My heart judders wildly before bottoming out, hitting the deepest pit of my stomach. Time stops as I stare into Raz’s dark eyes, waiting for him to laugh and tell me it’s a joke. Waiting for him to roll his eyes at me for believing him in the first place.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

It’s not true; I know it’s not.

I’m a human, for fuck’s sake, and they’re demons from Hell! I’m not their mythological soulmate or whatever the fuck it is.

I can’t be the one who did this to them.

“Wh-what?” I stutter out at last, willing him to tell the truth.

He sighs heavily, sliding a hand down his face before scratching at the stubble on his chin.

“You, Katrina, are our Center. Our fated mate,” he confesses after a long, long moment where I thought I was gonna combust.

“I can’t be!” I manage to say at last, shaking my head vehemently in denial. “I’m just...”

“You don’t *have* to be a demon,” Zolroth breaks in, sounding unbearably tired. “Though most Centers are the same species as their mates. I knew at the bowling alley, when I accidentally hurt myself. But I think a part of me suspected it was you from the start. I’ve never been as drawn to anyone in my life.”

“I’ve known since I got injured,” Akor pipes up, and Van nods in agreement.

“I suspected then as well,” he admits.

Slowly, all of the demons turn to look at Raz, who appears pained.

“And Razzy, here, knew from the get-go.” Akor’s voice is as dark as a moonless night, not a star in sight to break up the monotony. “Didn’t you?”

A murder's leader always knows when they run into their Center. They can feel the connection."

"Is that true?" I tremble wildly as I stare into Raz's heartbreakingly beautiful eyes. "Did you know from the beginning?"

Raz heaves out another sigh before nodding stiffly, clenching and then unclenching his jaw. "Yes," he grits out. "I knew."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell us?" Van hisses, and never in my life have I seen the lust demon so angry. Velvety black wings expand from his back as he glares at Raz, eyes shining red. "Why did you keep us guessing? If we would've known for sure—"

"You would've what? Killed her?" Raz snaps back, jumping to his feet and charging forward until he's in Van's face.

"Killed me?" I whisper in a small voice, and both demons immediately whip their heads in my direction. Panic starts to wrap around my heart like string, squeezing it tighter and tighter.

"No!" Van protests adamantly, shaking his head from side to side. "No, Kat. We would never hurt you."

"But you would've," Raz counters on a growl, "before you got to know her. You would've killed her just so we wouldn't be vulnerable."

Van doesn't refute Raz's claim, though his eyes do narrow into thin slits as he glares at his murder's leader.

"Katrina, please." Zolroth takes a step closer to me, his hand extended... the hand currently covered in Kastros's blood. "You have to understand—"

"It's my fault, isn't it?" I whisper numbly, wrenching my gaze away from Zolroth's and focusing on Kastros's still form. The only reassurance I have that he's still alive is the steady rise and fall of his chest. I have no doubt that he'll survive...this time. But what about the next angel attack? Or the time after that? How many more of these can they survive?

I'm their Center.

I can't even begin to wrap my head around the implications of that. Was I made specifically for them? Is that why I felt such a strong pull from the very first moment we met?

Hurt that they kept their suspicions from me, confusion over what exactly this means, and agony over what being their Center entails war within me. But one thing hasn't changed with Raz's dogmatic announcement—I refuse to be their downfall.

I refuse to make them vulnerable.

The knowledge of what I have to do sits on my chest like a three-hundred-pound weight. It doesn't quite break my rib cage, but instead, makes breathing uncomfortable. Whenever I draw in a shaky breath, I'm unable to inhale or exhale.

"I need to leave," I continue. "I need to leave and take Adam with me. You guys need to go too."

"Kitty Kat!" Akor says immediately, but when he takes a step closer, I take an automatic one backwards.

"No, Akor. No." Tears burn my retinas as I force myself to say what needs to be said. "Almost all of you have gotten hurt because of me. I make you vulnerable." I lift my head to meet Zolroth's piercing brown gaze. "You said it yourself that you wanted to kill your Center. In the kitchen after you were attacked. I heard you."

It almost appears as if there are tears in his eyes as well. "That was before I knew you. Before I've come to—"

"I think I'm in love with you guys," I blurt out, instantly wishing I could scoop the words up and shove them back into my mouth. But I can't. Instead, they hover in the air like a poisonous gas as all of the guys blink at me rapidly, dozens and dozens of emotions emanating from their gazes.

"Katrina, please," Raz begs, but I speak before he can continue.

"I'm going to grab Adam, and we're going to find a hotel to stay at." I bite my lip against the pain splintering me, cleaving me in two. Fuck, why does this have to hurt so much? I know it's for the best, I know it's our only

option, but it feels as if my body has been set on fire. “You guys fulfilled your end of the summons. You can leave now.”

And I’ll remain here.

Without them.

“Katrina, listen,” Van begins, but I’m already heading towards the spare room which has become Adam’s unofficial bedroom. When he places a hand on my arm, I jerk back, turning to face him as the tears finally run free.

“No, Van! Just no! I refuse to be the reason that you guys get hurt. Or worse, killed! I *absolutely fucking refuse*.”

None of the demons protest when I rouse a sleepy Adam up and force him into the back of Zolroth’s fancy sports car. I don’t even bother to ask if I can take it; it’s the only car in the vicinity, and I need to get away as fast as I can.

“Katrina,” Raz growls. “Don’t do this.”

“I’m not doing anything, Raz,” I whisper tiredly as I slide into the driver’s seat. Normally, I would’ve “oohed” and “awed” over this beautiful baby, but I can’t muster the will to even smile. There’s nothing remotely smile-worthy about today. “That’s the point.”

And then I back out of the driveway with my heart in my throat and tears burning my eyes.

This is for the best, Katrina, I tell myself firmly.

So why does it fucking hurt so much?

**RAZ**

Did she really think she could leave? Leave *me*?

Hell fucking no.

Just who the fuck does she think she is? After what we've shared?

My pulse palpitates as I hurl daggers with my eyes at the door she just disappeared through.

She left...taking my entire heart with her. Doesn't she know my feelings for her? Isn't it obvious every time I look at her—because it feels *fucking obvious*—my heart tries to jump through my throat, I can't even fucking speak, and it's all I can do not to have my eyes turn red in the middle of the gym when I see her in those damn tiny gym shorts? Every damn day, I've resisted the urge to shove her against the mats underneath the basketball hoops and fuck her senseless.

And every night...

Does she know how pissed I am that she has that kind of control over me? Does she have any damn clue how helpless I feel? Apparently not. Apparently, I'm gonna have to fucking spell it out for her. But I don't spell things out with hearts and flowers. I'll spell things out with my tongue, with my fingers. I'll spell it out on her skin until she looks like a goddamned encyclopedia.

“Raz...” Akor’s voice is practically a whine as he stares out the window like a besotted puppy looking for his owner. “She can’t leave, can she? She can’t.”

Abruptly, the pain on his face transforms into rage. Blistering hot rage that exacerbates my own fury.

“It’s your fault!” he seethes, balling his hands into fists. “It’s your fucking fault! You shouldn’t have told her anything!”

“And let her keep living a lie?” Zolroth snorts derisively. “She would come to resent us if we started this relationship with one.”

“What relationship?!?” Akor whirls on the materialism demon. “She fucking left us!”

“She said she loved us.” Van’s voice is dreamy, almost wistful, as he blinks rapidly at the closed door.

Ignoring him for the time being, I focus solely on Akor, the more volatile demon in my murder. “She’ll come back,” I vow as his eyes flash to my face. The grin I give him is the reason that demons are whispered about by humans in stark terror. Because there’s zero kindness in my grin, only pure determination.

Baby girl, do you really think I’ll ever let you go?



ZOLROTH

My tie suddenly feels unbearably tight, cutting off my circulation.

With a disgruntled huff, I loosen it until it cascades freely over my broad shoulders.

But then, my jacket becomes too constrictive, and I shove that bloody thing off as well.

I’m pacing, my loafers wearing a hole in the living room rug, as my eyes periodically flicker to the closed door.

Why did you have to leave, love? Don't you understand that we're selfish, cruel beasts?

I can never let her go.

In her deluded mind, she believes that she's doing this to save *us*. Protect *us*.

But we're big, scary demons, and we don't need her protection. No, we just need *her*.

Katrina.

Even her name fills me up with blindingly bright light. I feel weightless, like my wings are propelling me miles above the earth and I'm gliding along with the wind currents. In only a few short weeks, she has consumed my every thought, my every decision, my entire fucking heart. And now, she bloody left.

My heart feels her loss so keenly, I'm surprised it's not audibly weeping for her.

The others are moaning and bitching, but I much prefer to take the initiative to get what I want. And what I want is Katrina.

Pulling out my phone, I type in the website to the local florist and begin to look through the various flower arrangements. Twenty dozen red roses, perhaps? Delivered to her hotel room? I should easily be able to hack her credit card and see where she's staying. That's not an issue.

Maybe I could release a flock of white doves...

A tiny grin curls up my lips as I exit the floral shop website and pull up a local boutique. I visited it once before a couple weeks earlier, with every intention of surprising Katrina with a gorgeous, homemade dress. I went through her clothes on that very first night and wrote down all of her sizes. I'm sure I can make her a custom gown that fits her like a glove. Isn't there a dance coming up soon?

The Nightmare Before Christmas thingy?

This time, my smile is broader, wider, practically cleaving my face in two.

I'll win my girl back, there's no doubt in my mind about that.

And hopefully, it'll be in time for the winter dance.

Hmmm. I wonder if I can get a matching suit as well...

I'll buy this entire bloody world if it means keeping her in my arms.



AKOR

On a scale of one to ten, how bad would it be if I kidnapped her, threw her in the back of my minivan, and locked her in my bedroom until the end of time? Asking for a friend, of course.

And that friend's me.

There's an emotion settling in the pit of my chest, one that I've never felt before.

It almost feels like...like my heart's on fire. Like someone's doused it in gasoline and lit a match and *whoosh*. Big flames.

But that's assuming I have a heart, of course, instead of an endless pit of pain and despair.

You would think I would thrive on shit like this, being a pain demon and all, but it fucking sucks. This broken heart thing? Hate it. It kinda makes me want to slam my hand into my ribcage, grab my heart, and then crush it into a ball of fine dust particles. And then, just because I'm a vindictive son of a bitch, I'll give my crushed heart to Katrina as a gift.

That's assuming I don't die from it, of course. But semantics, am I right?

I'm practically giddy as my mind runs through the various things I can do to win her back. Isn't there a saying about the possibilities being endless?

Oh! Maybe I'll turn William into a firework for her enjoyment! It's totally possible. I just need a saw, a lighter, and explosives.

I know I'm feared by the other demons—even my own murder. They call me eccentric and crazy, lewd and irrational.

But they haven't seen crazy yet. They're going to. The entire fucking world will.

Because I'll win Katrina back, even if I have to embrace my own insanity to do it.



VAN

I've watched a million women walk out the door over the centuries, and I've never even looked twice, not even to appreciate the sway of their asses as they left.

But this time, it's different.

This time, I feel like all the color in the room leaves with her and I'm standing in this dull, black and white existence. This time, my tongue feels heavy and my knees feel leaden and I can't move.

What is this feeling? What's this dull thud in my chest that echoes like the cavity inside is empty?

I feel like sinking to the floor and never moving again. I feel like crawling under the covers and eating a box of chocolates. I feel like eating an entire pizza by myself and following it up with rocky road ice cream.

Oh my God.

I know what this is.

It's heartache.

Katrina's just broken my heart.

I thought that was impossible. I thought I'd never fall in love. Throughout my centuries of life, all of these other relationships have been

meaningless. And I thought that was because love wasn't real. I thought it was an illusion.

That's not true.

It's just so special that it's literally a one-in-a-million chance.

Katrina's the one.

She's our one. Our Center.

And there's no way in fuck I'll let her go.

I don't know exactly what I'll do to win her back yet, but I know where to look. I pull up Netflix on my phone and search for the greatest romantic comedies of all time.



KASTROS

It's better this way. I don't want it to be, I wish it wasn't so, but she's better off without us. Katrina's human. And her soul... It makes my chest clench just thinking about how pure her soul is, how sweet, how full it is of the most potent force in the universe—love.

When I woke up, my entire body still throbbing, I knew immediately that Katrina was gone. They didn't even need to say a word for me to know that she'd left, taking my soul with her. The pain in my body feels insignificant compared to the ache where my heart once was.

I've never seen a big sister take such good care of her little brother or be so utterly protective of him. After all she's been through, she could have turned into a bitter, selfish person. But Katrina's not like that.

She's so delicate and beautiful, like a flower.

If we pluck her, she'll die.

It's better if we walk away and leave her here to grow and flourish like she's done for so many years. Better for her and for us. Walking away is

sometimes the hardest thing to do, but look at her, she did it.

She's so damn strong.

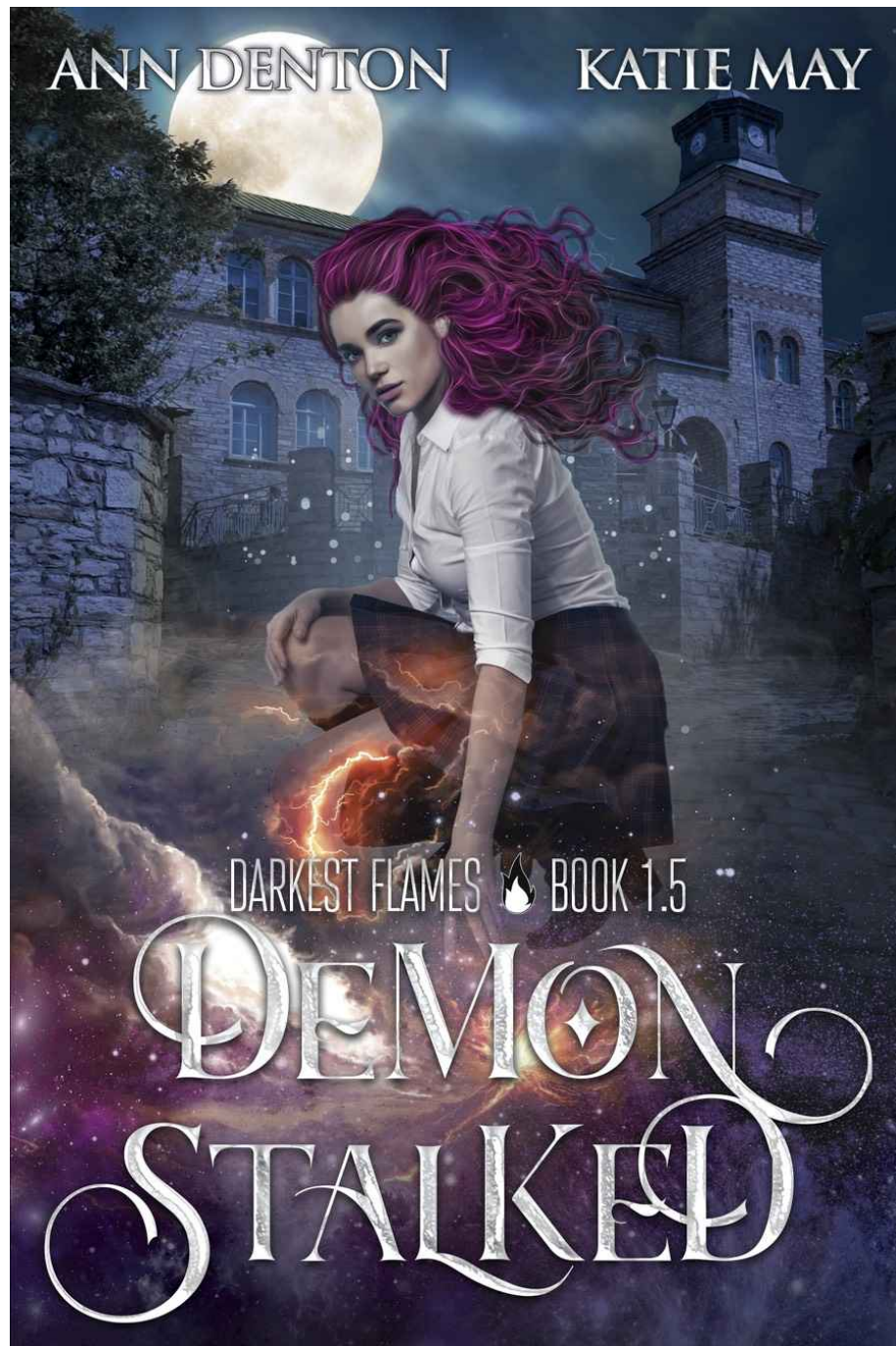
Tears gather in the corner of my eyes, and I swipe at them. Old hurts gape and old wounds are scratched raw inside my chest as around me, all of the other guys rant and rage or plan or swoon.

They're all going to try to convince her to stay, but what if she does? What if she does and one of us is killed? What will that do to her? To Adam?

What if something happens to *her*?

They're all going to try to convince her she made the wrong decision. That means it's going to be up to me to convince her she made the right one.

Pre-Order Book 1.5 Now!



Demon Stalked is part of the *[Wicked Souls Anthology](#)* coming out September 29. You'll definitely want to read just how the demons

convince Katrina to go to the dance with them!

Ann Denton

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Ann and Katie are very dedicated to research, so they went to heaven and hell during the course of this book and may or may not have summoned some demons while constructing the spell portion at the start. Any and all demonic STIs you contract as a result of reading this book are most definitely *not* caused by a spell that they performed and they cannot be held liable for such. Thanks for reading!

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